

LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for March 11: A unique person: Praise God

February 27, 2012

How do you react to Christmas? Our culture's celebrations of Jesus' birth can bring out some strong reactions. I don't react positively to the carols and trees and lights until after Thanksgiving. When I walk into a store and see a Christmas display before Halloween, I can't help but feel rushed.

Some people don't like Christmas music at all and react quite strongly to it. But others turn into little red and green fairies, spreading cheer, cookies and candies to all. And, of course, every year we hear from the culture warriors on the "war on Christmas."

My point is that Christmas brings with it strong reactions. This is to be expected if Christmas is understood rightly. Christmas proclaims a powerful message with important implications. Jesus deserves a strong reaction.

We see in Luke's Gospel that even the very first Christmas was received quite differently by different folks. I think one reason is because it was so entirely unexpected and counterintuitive. We read in 2:6-7 that when it was time for the baby to be born—the one whose coming was announced by an angel and who was conceived by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a virgin—that he did not arrive in a palace, not even in an inn.

The Greek word for "inn" in this verse refers not to a formal inn (like in the story of the Good Samaritan), but to something like a covered area for lots of people. In other words, not only could Joseph and Mary not get a room at

the motel, they couldn't even get into the homeless shelter. So Mary had to give birth to the promised King of kings in an animal stable. Jesus arrived wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a feeding trough. Nothing is as one might expect.

Then the scene changes in Luke 2:8 to a shepherd's field. In this field outside of town to a group of lowly shepherds, a multitude of angels appeared to announce and celebrate the birth of Jesus. Shouldn't such an important announcement deserve primetime?

The Messiah's arrival surely warranted the attention of the world's greatest, most powerful people. It should've taken place center stage. Yet God doesn't measure and plan as we do. The glorious, heavenly announcement of this unique royal birth was made at night in a field outside a tiny town to a bunch of common folk. Nothing is as one might expect.

God does not want us to ever believe for one second that he favors some of us over others on the basis of some worldly measure of status or success.

James 2:5 reminds us: "Listen, my dear brothers: Has not God chosen those who are poor in the eyes of the world to be rich in faith and to inherit the kingdom he promised those who love him?"

Or consider Paul's words in 2 Corinthians 8:9, "For you now the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich."

Christians should ask frequently, "Why me, Lord?" The answer is powerful and humbling: Grace alone. Grace means it is nothing in us, by us or through us, but it is a gift for us. Jesus came for the sinners, not the righteous. God's strength is for the weak. His comfort is for the mourning, and his kingdom is for the poor. The ones who hunger and thirst for righteousness are satisfied.

The legalistic religious leaders are left scratching their heads as Jesus dines with prostitutes and tax collectors. Nothing is as one might expect.

The reason Christmas provokes such a strong reaction is because the gospel gives us truth about God and ourselves that's not what the world expects. When something strikes us as strange, different or even confounding, sometimes we react poorly. But we don't have to.

Consider the many different reactions to Jesus' birth. In Matthew 2, we read about the wise men who reacted in worship, giving and pursuit of the Savior. That's a good reaction. We should pray to react like them, seeking Jesus so we might give him our greatest gifts, our hearts.

But we also read in the same chapter of Herod's reaction. He was furious another would be called a king. He felt threatened by another's claim to authority. So he had all the baby boys around Bethlehem killed.

Sometimes we react like Herod. We don't want another king. We want to remain the ruler of our own lives rather than deal with the reality that Jesus has a right to reign over us.

Back in Luke 2:18, we read of a crowd who heard the shepherd's story and "were amazed at what the shepherds said to them." They marveled and were intrigued, but this doesn't mean they worshipped or had saving faith. It was just a really great story they wouldn't mind hearing again. Perhaps they'd even buy some figurines to put up once a year to symbolize it. Many of us react to Jesus like this. "What a wonderful story," we think, going on about our lives as if it doesn't make a real difference.

These crowds are contrasted with shepherds in Luke 2:20, who went back to the fields praising God. They believed and were changed by the Christmas story.

And then there's Mary, who "treasured up all these things and pondered

them in her heart” (v. 19). The coming of Jesus was taken in, all the way in, to the deepest parts of her being.

That’s what I want to do: Treasure Jesus and ponder him. Only then can I loosen my grip on how I expect the world to work and react to all life’s events with faith that “nothing is impossible with God” (1:37).