

Part 2: More than Sentimental

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The phrase "thoughts and prayers" used to be something which was met with universal gratitude. But in our post-Christian world it has quickly become one of the most divisive phrases in our national dialogue.

Anytime there is a tragic shooting you see some individuals posting, "thoughts and prayers" to the victim's families. But on the other side you see a crew of people tearing apart those who only wish for "thoughts and prayers." And while it's easy to simply let such debates cause our digital trigger fingers to itch, it is worthwhile to consider the implications and messaging behind this debate.

You see for someone who doesn't believe in a God who cares, or who is involved in this world, then prayers really are nothing. As Christians we know that prayer is not empty, but powerful. Prayer is not a cop out, it is a plea for powerful change. But we cannot expect a culture who denies the existence of such a sovereign power to take any comfort from this.

While such a positions carry with it some theological conclusions, what they also describe are the limits of sentimentality. If thoughts and prayers are just a mere sentiment of sorrow, they want nothing to do with it. When lives are at stake, when needs are urgent, mere sentiment is not enough. When real consolation is yearned for, real hope is demanded.

This is an important realization for us as both Christians and non-Christians to consider during the Christmas season. Christmastime is ripe with sentimentality. From traditions, to foods, to decorations and music, the whole season is designed to invoke warm fuzzies.

Even in our post-Christian culture, this seasonal sentimentality carries with it religious themes. From nativity scenes, to Hallmark movies, to the lyrics of music playing in our stores, overtones of the virgin birth, shepherds, wise men and an infant savior still find a home in popular culture.

But I wonder if we are all too content with sentimentalism. I wonder if we in our own lives are prone to create a world of discipleship which revolves around the window dressing of Christianity instead of the substance of it. And I wonder if part of our failures in evangelism lay in our merely sentimental descriptions and discussions about the gospel.

It's not that sentimentality in culture or in our relationship with God is bad. But it's that sentimentality rarely changes things, rarely prepares us for anything, and rarely endures us.

But that's why this season, ripe with sentimentality is a perfect season to show us that the good news of Jesus' birth, and his gospel, is far more than sentimentality. In a world full of real joy, real sorrow, and real trials, the gospel engages our emotions in ways that actually change us.

If our understanding of walking with God is only superficial, then we will often wrestle with doubt when the superficial sights and smells of faith seem to be distant. Or for those who are seeking Jesus, if the Jesus we preach is only cosmetic, then it won't take long for you to look at Jesus and say, "How can this actually deal with the problems in my life?"

But this is why we must seriously consider not only sentimentality, but seriously consider the ways in which this story of silent nights, starry skies, swaddling clothes and stunned shepherds changes us.

In Luke chapter 2 today we are going to see three encounters people have with the news of Jesus' birth, and we are going to see their emotion. But behind their emotion we are going to see enduring responses which shaped their hearts and sustained them in ways sentimentalism never could.

So what we are going to see today is that the news of the birth of Jesus **compels, captivates and endures our hearts**.

So let's start today by reading the first part of our text: **Luke 2:8-20**.

Here we see the story of the Shepherds and the birth of Jesus, and here we see our first point this morning. The news of Jesus' birth **compelled the hearts of the Shepherds**.

Now when I say compelled, I mean that it moved them. There was no command by the angels to go and see this baby. Instead the news of this child was so compelling that the only right response they had to it was to drop everything to see this Savior king.

I'm not a big Christmas decoration guy. A few years ago I bought some lights for the outside of our house. But not long after I took them down and put them on a shelf in the garage, only to weeks later, throw something onto that shelf which broke all the lights. All of this in front of my family.

Since then my family has accused me of killing Christmas because I've never gone out and purchased new lights. Sarah, whom I love so very dearly, even took the kids around town the other night to look at all the other houses which have Christmas lights. And when the family returned they had a five point outline as to why I needed to go out and purchase new lights. I did not find them to be very convincing.

But here is the deeper point I want to make. Despite all the internal debate in our home about me killing the Christmas spirit, no one else has taken the initiative to go to the store, buy lights, hook the little clamps to them, take a ladder out of the shed, secure it on icy and snowy footing, and hang from the gutters for an extended period of time. Sentimentality itself isn't compelling enough in our home to make this happen. I'm sure you've experienced a similar limit.

But these shepherds were compelled in a costly way. Culturally at this point in time there were not many positions lower on the social ladder than shepherds. Their testimony was not accepted in court. They were excluded from almost all religious functions. They were not well paid, not well groomed, and lived as social outcasts in the fields with their flocks.

And yet, these men were so compelled that they willingly went on a specifically religious mission, not fearing rejection. They proclaimed an eye-witness testimony, not fearing irrelevance. They left their flocks, unconcerned about losing their jobs.

Why? Well if we encountered what the shepherds encountered wouldn't we be so compelled? If you were sitting in the still of night, away from all the lights of the city, and then all of a sudden an angel appeared, and the glory of the Lord lit up the sky, and then the angel spoke, and then after he spoke the

entire angelic army of heaven appeared and began to sing, wouldn't you be compelled as well? This is the experience we all want with God isn't it?

But what's interesting is that this angelic encounter, in all its sensory experience, wasn't what captivated them. Look at what Luke records: **Luke 2:15**. They left this supernatural, angelic field to see a baby. A baby in a manger. They valued this baby more than they valued this supernatural space. Something beyond the sensory experience captivated them so much so that note what they communicated when they found the manger: **Luke 2:16-17**.

Now if you were the shepherds, what's the first thing you would say when you saw this baby? My guess is I would focus on the whole heavens opening, angelic choir, glory of the Lord bit. But they focused on the message. They relayed to Mary and Joseph of first importance what they had been told concerning this child. What compelled them, what stood out to them was ultimately the word of God. They reported not all they had seen, but all they had heard.

What did they hear? **Luke 2:10-14**.

The angles proclaimed to these shepherds that God's Christ has come. The messiah. The savior. And I think that the most compelling parts of this message for the shepherds were to two phrases the angels said, "For unto you a savior is born," and "this will be a sign for you."

You see because of the outcast nature of the shepherds, I doubt that any generic savior would warrant such a compelling response. But this salvation was for them. For you. For those who were insignificant, for those who were broken, for those without a reasonable hope, a savior had come.

Have you considered the individual nature of this salvation? Do you realize that Jesus didn't come in general? He came for real people. Real people who would respond and believe that message. The good news of the gospel of Jesus isn't that Jesus came to be a savior, the good news is that he came to be your savior, and the savior of all whom he would call to himself.

We know so little personal background about these shepherds. But what we do know is that in a moment they were convinced that they needed this savior, and their encounter with him shaped what followed: **Luke 2:20**.

Only when you see that Jesus is the savior you need to save you from your sin will you ever be compelled by anything more than sentimentality.

But when we encounter, like the shepherds, such great news that speaks so directly to our need for a savior, we would expect an emotional response. This isn't wrong, in fact it's good! But how do we make sure that, like Christmas lights, this kind of emotion isn't seasonal or circumstantial? Powerful, but fleeting a month later?

Well this is where we look at Mary's response to all of this: **Luke 2:17-19**. This is our second point this morning, the news of Jesus' birth **captivated the heart of Mary**.

Now I know I've said this myself when preaching on this text. I made some sort of joke about how this is the mom-est of all texts in scripture: Mary treasuring everything going on around the manger. But this is not a mere sentimental treasuring.

We know that because it is set in contrast with those who wondered. The tones behind the Greek words here are that some wondered, they were amazed and impressed. But Mary kept these things in her mind, she stored them up, she defended them and she pondered them. More than merely encountering what she heard, Mary engaged deeply with what she heard.

In Luke 1 an angel of the Lord appeared to Mary and said this: **Luke 1:30-33**. So Mary had heard the promise of God, and now for the first time she is looking at the promise of God and hearing the shepherds confirm the promise all the more and her response is to treasure it.

What is she treasuring? The promise of God's salvation, the witness of the angels, and the Messiah king to whom she had just given birth. I think culturally we wrestle with this idea of treasuring. Our media age is so distracted, and our attention spans are so short that we rarely reflect on what we experience.

Since we had our newest baby a couple weeks ago there have been a number of people from the church who have dropped off dinners for our family. One of the dinners included a collection of chocolate caramels from Trader Joes. Now my wife and I both love chocolate caramels. And my normal experience with caramels is to eat one and say, "I would like another"

That's as deep as my reflection gets. But this collection was actually a game. It told you which flavors of caramels were in the box, but it didn't tell you which caramel was which. You had to taste them and try to guess which one was which. So instead of just thinking in terms of, "This collection of sugar and chocolate is good," I had to really taste it. I had to ponder it.

Ironically, my wife and I had to split each caramel. Normally this would have been a point of contention in our home, but it was one of the more rewarding experiences because we savored and enjoyed each bite more than we thought we would.

Have you ever considered the gospel with such a slow and savoring tongue?

I'm sure that each of you have had times either in prayer, worship, or even Bible reading where you have the warm fuzzy affect of sentimentality. Have you ever taken time to question why and what is producing that?

Have you looked at the birth of Jesus and just thought about it? Have you read Philippians 2 and considered how scandalous it would be that God would become a man and take the form of a servant? Have you gasped at the reality that he who knew no sin became sin so that you might be declared clean?

May we be a church who learns to treasure Christ like this!

Now if we aren't careful we can misread a specific experience of emotion into Mary's treasuring. We can assume that if we really treasure the gospel it will be only roses and riches when it comes to our walk with God. And we can mistakenly think that if we are not tasting the ecstatic sweetness of the gospel at any moment in time that we are somehow less Christian than those around us.

But Mary's life is going to have some ups and downs. We will see that already this new mother is being prepared for the murder of her son. A few chapters later in the book of Luke we are going to see that

Mary and the rest of her family are going to be a little suspect of Jesus' sanity thinking that maybe he's gone a bit crazy. And by the end of the book we are going to see her gazing on the death of her son for the sins of the world.

There were soon to come times where Mary's experience was far from this manger scene. And in those moments she needed to rely not on what she encountered, but on the storehouses of what she treasured.

When you are reading God's word, when you go to God in prayer, don't neglect the hard work of treasuring. As we start new Bible reading plans this year, don't just read God's word, but stop and consider it. Consider what it tastes like so that in times of famine you can still remind yourself of the flavors of grace.

Because there will be times where we need to learn how to wait and endure even in a world which has already seen the advent of Jesus. And it is here where we see our last point this morning, the news of Jesus' birth **endured the heart of Simeon**.

Where this past story showed the events directly surrounding Jesus' birth, this next story picks up a little while after Jesus' birth. The Old Testament law required that first born sons are to be brought to the temple in Jerusalem and dedicated to the Lord. And this text that we are going to look at now describes this scene: **Luke 2:21-32**.

If your experience with the gospel is based only on sentimentality, it will not endure you in seasons of waiting. This is why I love the story of Simeon in this text.

We don't know much about Simeon. Luke is the only gospel writer who shares this story. We aren't sure if he is priest, or if he had an official position in the temple but we do know a couple things. We know that he was righteous and devout. In a time when most of Israel wanted nothing to do with God, Simeon was faithfully following God's law.

He was also waiting for the consolation of Israel. And I love this language here. Because what does the need for consolation assume? It assumes that there is something wrong, that there is real sorrow, that with an honest eye we can look at our world and say, "It shouldn't be this way!"

And he knew that God, the God of the Bible, had one day promised his people Israel that he would console them. That he would take what was broken and put it back together, that he would mend the sins that separated them from God and he would do so through the Lord's Christ, that is the messiah.

Another thing we know about Simeon is that he had been given over to a life of waiting. The Holy Spirit revealed to him in a special and unique way that he wouldn't die until he saw this messiah. You can imagine the anticipation and potential pain this would bring.

Every day waking up hoping that somehow despite the brokenness, you would see the one who will make everything right. Every day looking, every day not seeing it. Every day wondering whether or not God is actually able to bring this consolation.

Until that one day. That one day where without Simeon being introduced to Mary and Joseph or Mary and Joseph being introduced to Simeon, the Holy Spirit drew Simeon to the baby Jesus Christ and finally he saw it and said, **Luke 2:29-32**.

Now here is the wonder of this. What did Simeon see? A baby. A baby being commissioned to the service of the Lord. And for him that was enough to say, "Take me home Lord."

He didn't see a conquering King. He didn't see nations trembling at the hope of Israel. He didn't see military might. He didn't see a single leper cleansed, a single wound healed, a single miracle performed and yet he knew that the consolation had come.

Why? Because if God had sent his Messiah, if even as a baby, then God was going to see his plan of redemption all the way through. Salvation was no longer in doubt. He saw all he needed to see.

And look at what he says afterwards to Joseph and Mary regarding the nature of their newborn son: **Luke 2:33-35**.

Why is it wise to question our sentimentality? Because Jesus came to reveal your hearts. And Luke chapter 2 is very clear on what that can look like in your life. Jesus can be a sign which reveals in your hearts the light of God's salvation. Or Jesus can be a sign which reveals in your heart the opposition of sin.

But the culmination of all of our emotion is this: how are you responding to this news. This news that God sees the brokenness of sin in your heart and the consequences of it in this world and that God has sought to console those who feel it by sending his Messiah.

I don't know where you are in your life, but here is what I know, everyone is waiting for this news. Even if you are a non-believer in here, or someone dragged here during the holiday season. This is what you're waiting for.

The shepherds had no idea they were waiting for anything. If you asked them they were just waiting out the clock on shift. Maybe that's you? But when the news of the gospel came to them, they knew it warranted a response. They knew as the angels proclaimed, that God's peace had finally come but only to those with which he was pleased.

This is a problem for us because our sin, our opposition of Jesus means that we lack this peace. Our sin separates us from God and places us under his wrath. But this is why Jesus' is good news. Look at **Colossians 1:19-20**.

There is finally peace. The call of the gospel called shepherds from their flocks, fishermen from their net, and it has come to call you to something better as well. Would you consider that Jesus isn't after your seasonal emotions, he's after the whole of your life?

For others will you see this promise of God's salvation in Jesus as something deeply enduring? What Mary needed at the manger, Simeon modeled in the temple: deep enduring trust even when life is hard.

This week was a hard week for me, there was no sentimental passion this Christmas week. I was weighted, I was burdened, and I wasn't sure why.

But in God's wonderful providence he ordained that a weak and melancholy preacher would be forced to articulate the abiding hope of Advent.

But this is where the work of Mary and the hope of Simeon caused me to do the work of gospel waiting. Here in Simeon we have a man who at the simple sight of the infant Savior, knew that God was good on his word.

God was good to bring his peace. God was good to redeem his people. God was good to never depart from his elect. God was good to love the unlovable.

But haven't we as New Testament believers seen far more than Simeon? We have seen not only Jesus' birth, but his perfect law-keeping life, his atoning sacrifice for our sins on the cross, his life-giving resurrection from the dead, we have heard his promise that he will return again to make all things new, we have seen the church throughout the centuries gather and wait hopefully, joyfully amidst triumph and tears.

Should we not even more than Simeon learn to rejoice in the hope of this Savior King!

This Advent season with the lights and the sights we remind ourselves of the hope which will endure us when everything leaves: Christ has come.

That is no light sentimentality that is serious gospel joy. It compels us, it captivates us, and by God's grace it will endure us. The real needs of our world and of our hearts are provided for abundantly in Jesus so we rejoice with deep joy even in moments of dryness.

Sentimentalism doesn't fix anything, but Jesus does.