

## INTRODUCTION: The Danger of a Sentimental Christmas

Most every Christmas, my Mom and Dad will whip out their infamous [25-question “Christmas IQ Test”](#) for use in a small group, a Bible study, or a family gathering. If my brothers are watching, they’ve probably already chuckled (at best) or perhaps rolled their eyes (at worst). This test is not for the faint-hearted—let’s just say it has “clothed many in garments of humility.”<sup>1</sup> The instructions read as follows:

*Read and answer each question in the order it appears. When choices are given, read them carefully and select the best one in accordance with the Bible and authoritative historical documents...Guessing is permitted; cheating is not.*

Let’s try a few of these questions out. After I read each question and the multiple choice options, take a moment and share your answer in the group chat!

1. How many revelatory dreams did Joseph have?
  - a. None.
  - b. One
  - c. Two too many
  - d. Three
  - e. **Four**<sup>2</sup>
  
2. Jesus was delivered in:
  - a. Stable
  - b. Manger
  - c. Cave
  - d. Barn
  - e. **Unknown**<sup>3</sup>
  
3. What did the angels sing to the shepherds the night Jesus was born?
  - a. “Joy to the world, the Lord is come!”
  - b. “Alleluia.”
  - c. “Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given.”
  - d. “Glory to God in the highest!”
  - e. “Hark!” (the herald angels sing)
  - f. **None of the above.**<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Peter 5:5.

<sup>2</sup> (1) Not to divorce Mary; (2) to flee to Egypt; (3) to return from Egypt; and (4) to change his return route. Joseph is often forgotten in the story of Jesus, and yet it is his soft heart to God’s leading that saves his family from violence and death on more than one occasion.

<sup>3</sup> While scripture says Mary laid Jesus in a manger (Luke 2:7), we don’t know where the manger was. In fact, there appears to be [plenty of cultural, historical, and textual evidence which suggests](#) Jesus and his family were in a house—there just wasn’t room for them in the *kataluma* (the “spare or upper room in a private house or in a village, where travelers often received hospitality and no payment was expected”). More than likely, the guest room was already full, and Jesus was laid in the manger connected to the house.

<sup>4</sup> Luke 2:13-14 simply says the angels were “praising God and saying” rather than singing. Take it up with my parents!

Now, as silly and strained as this quiz may be, I think it can be helpful in demonstrating just how *sentimental* our understanding of Christmas really is, and how that sentimentality can short-circuit a deeper understanding of the true Christmas story.<sup>5</sup> Now, don't get me wrong: I'm as sentimental and nostalgic as anyone I know! I think part of the reason I attach so much emotional weight to key moments in my memory has to do with growing up in a military family. When you move every three or four years, sentimental memories function like markers on a map: they provide comfort, familiarity, and otherwise help organize my life into a story that makes sense. And yet, when it comes to my faith and identity as a Christian, that temptation towards comfort and familiarity is dangerous. That is why I agree with Stanley Hauerwas, a widely respected Professor of Theology and Ethics at Duke Divinity School, who has often said that "*the greatest enemy of Christianity is not atheism, but sentimentality.*"

Harsh words. What exactly is Hauerwas getting at? No, he's not condemning the smells of pine trees, the sound of a crackling fire, the taste of hot chocolate, or the smiles that accompany a good gift given or received. These holiday habits rekindle a sentimentalism that is safe, warm, and comforting. And while that's mostly harmless in the context of seasonal family traditions, it can be devastating in other situations. After all, we live in a nation built on a rotten foundation of sentimental narratives—the American Dream, Manifest Destiny—that draw their power from a kind of selective nostalgia that oversimplifies our complex past and saps the truth from our collective memory.

The gospel cannot become that kind of story as well. It isn't supposed to go down easy. When Christianity becomes sentimental, it may appear to be full of devotion, when in fact it has mutated into a self-serving, feel-good religion wrapped in cliché and otherwise incompatible with the very device that shapes our faith: *the cross of Christ*. Consider that the Apostle Paul describes the message of the cross as "complete absurdity."<sup>6</sup> And yet, Paul wants nothing more—not his titles, his heritage, his history—than to know Jesus crucified.<sup>7</sup> "May I never boast," Paul says, "except in the cross of our Lord, Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world."<sup>8</sup> For Paul, to follow Jesus is to experience a kind of death that leads to new life.<sup>9</sup> Paul's vision of the Christian faith is a *cruciform*, or cross-shaped, because Christ's faithfulness is expressed first in his death on the cross, and then in our death to the ways of this world as we deny ourselves and carry our own crosses. That isn't sentimental—**sentimentality soothes our consciences and settles us in. The Cross awakens us to the compelling, confrontational reality of Jesus and his Kingdom.**

I believe we are especially susceptible to the danger of sentimentalizing our faith at Christmas, when we are bombarded with "Hallmarkian" fairy tales about Jesus' birth. The true Christmas story is *not* sweet or sentimental—the arrival of King Jesus is a kingdom-shattering moment, an announcement that the way things have always been are backwards and broken, that a new way is breaking in, and that through it all God keeps his promises. And if you don't see that

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<sup>5</sup> By "sentimental" I mean trivializing the truth of something, usually for our own comfort and security.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:18-19.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 2:2, 11:26.

<sup>8</sup> Galatians 6:14-15

<sup>9</sup> Micahel Gorman, *Cruciformity: Paul's Narrative Spirituality on the Cross*. Erdmans, 2001.

confrontation, look at how Jesus' birth catalyzed the wrath of worldly kings: he and his family are forced to flee Herod's murderous wrath against the children of Bethlehem and seek asylum in Egypt, the very place where another ruler unleashed his own murderous rage against Hebrew children thousands of years earlier.<sup>10</sup> In the end, even after Herod dies, a total of five Herods go on to persecute Jesus and his church over the next generation. **These Herods understood one thing: if Jesus is Lord, then Caesar is not.** Again, not exactly sentimental.

Family, this is why our crucified Messiah is the antidote to all our sentimental impulses this season. The harsh events surrounding his birth—and his life—remind us how our Savior "shared in our humanity" and was "made like us in every respect."<sup>11</sup> And because he suffered our every pain and sorrow, from the trials of his early years as a refugee, to his life of poverty, to his unjust death at the hands of corrupt powers, "he is able to help those who suffer."<sup>12</sup> If anyone understood the power of a Savior in solidarity with the sorrowful, **it was the shepherds of Bethlehem**—they are the focus of today's message. They, like the evil kings who persecuted Jesus, knew that if this baby was Lord, Caesar was not. And in their receipt and response to the Gospel, they revealed the inauguration of the God's Kingdom, the collapse of the worldly kingdoms, and the truth that the Way of the Cross will triumphs over the ways of the Powers.

I have organized today's sermon into three parts: **THE INAUGURATION, THE COLLAPSE,** and **THE CHOICE.** We'll focus on Luke 2:8-20, and I invite you to turn there as we pray together:

Father, as we gaze upon the nativity scene that has been sentimentalized to us, and as we look upon Bethlehem's outcast shepherds, soften our hearts, open our eyes, and guide us with a gentle rod. Let us not lose sight of this striking irony—a handful of shepherds, marginalized by generations of enmity, cast down by the social and religious elite—were chosen to break the silence of centuries, herald the Messiah's birth, and inaugurate his Kingdom. Humble us, Father. Help us to see that your ways are not ours. Help us to understand that it profits us nothing to gain the world if we must first forfeit our soul. Give us the grace to understand that to find our lives, we must first lose them.

## I. THE INAUGURATION

As we turn to Luke 2:8-20, what we will find is a compelling glimpse into the Kingdom of God in how it is inaugurated through the Shepherds receipt of and response to the Gospel.

Luke's gospel is the only one that describes the angels' encounter with the shepherds. That's important for reasons we'll come back to later. For now, let's focus on those shepherds for a moment and their cultural and social situation. I'd like to do that by using a portrait from the Italian painter, Giorgione,<sup>13</sup> called [\*The Adoration of the Shepherds\*](#). Yes, I know—a dusty old

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<sup>10</sup> Exodus 1:15-2:10.

<sup>11</sup> Hebrews 2:17, 4:15.

<sup>12</sup> Hebrews 2:10-18.

<sup>13</sup> Long considered one of the greatest artists of the Renaissance, very little is known about his short life may have died during a plague epidemic in 1510 at age 32 or 33), and only a few paintings can be definitively attributed to him. *The Adoration of the Shepherds* is now almost unanimously accepted as Giorgione's work. See "Giorgione: The Adoration of the Shepherds | 1505-1510" from the [National Gallery of Art](#).

Renaissance painting with a pale, white Jesus. Give me a chance! I think you'll find this painting compelling. It truly portrays what the Bible reveals. There are so many wonderful details captured in this portrait—it is a classic case study in the beauty of treating art with patience.

#### A. The Shepherds' Marginalization

To the left of the photo, we see a winding road stretching from the distant, mountainous outskirts of Bethlehem all the way to the manger. Giorgione is making it clear: these men don't belong here. They are fringe-dwellers, outliers, wild men from the hills deliberately placed beyond society's carefully constructed boundaries. Out of sight and out of mind. This is consistent with the widely agreed upon historical understanding of first century Hebrew culture. Shepherds were despised—they were second class citizens, untrustworthy, disallowed from providing testimony in court. In fairness, this reputational wound was at least partially self-inflicted. Shepherds were often dishonest and thieving—they would lead their herds onto other people's lands and steal its produce. And because they often worked for months without supervision, they were suspected of stealing some of their flock's increase for their own food and clothing. The Jewish historian Jeremias went so far as to note that "to buy wool, milk, or a kid [baby goat] from a shepherd was forbidden on the assumption that it would have been stolen property."<sup>14</sup>

And yet, as is often the case when examining social and political marginalization, the dynamics are much more complex and insidious. Thousands of years before Jesus' birth, during the time of the nomadic Hebrew Patriarchs, shepherding was noble.<sup>15</sup> But when the Hebrew people migrated to Egypt, they were confronted by a lifestyle foreign to them: farming. Over the course of four hundred years of slavery, the Egyptians prejudiced the Hebrew people's attitude against shepherding. Egyptians considered the Hebrew's sheep worthless for food or sacrifice, and their clean-shaven appearance further humiliated the rugged Hebrew shepherds. By the time God's people settled in Canaan, many Hebrew tribes chose a farming lifestyle, leaving shepherding as a menial task for the laboring class. And by the time of the prophets, shepherds were used as symbols of judgment and social isolation.<sup>16</sup> The prophet Amos went so far as to contrast his former role as a shepherd with his new, high calling as a prophet.<sup>17</sup>

So, by the time of Jesus' birth, shepherding was not merely unappealing—it had become socially unacceptable and defined by cruel stereotypes. And rather than correct the injustice, religious leaders exacerbated the situation. The Mishnah, Judaism's record of the oral law, reflects the deep prejudices against shepherds. One passage describes them as incompetent, while another states no one should feel obligated to rescue a shepherd who has fallen into a pit!

#### B. The Shepherds' Welcomed

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<sup>14</sup> Jeremias, "The Shepherd in Later Judaism." *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*. Erdmans, 1985.

<sup>15</sup> Shepherds are first mentioned in the Bible in Genesis 4, where Jabal is called the "Father of those living in tents and raising livestock." Isaac and Jacob's wealthy sons tended flocks. Jethro, the priest of Midian and father-in-law to Moses, employed his daughters and shepherdesses.

<sup>16</sup> Zephaniah 2:6.

<sup>17</sup> Amos 7:14.

Returning to Giorgione's painting, note the location of these lowly shepherds. Nearly every other Renaissance-era painter places the Holy Family smack-dab in the middle of nativity composition, while lesser characters like shepherds, the magi, animals, and others are arranged around Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Not here! Giorgione places the shepherds at the center of his frame, kneeling, ragged and bare-headed before their Messiah, having left all their sheep behind. Notice, too, that Giorgione not only places them at the center of his painting, but in a kind of equilibrium with Mary and Joseph. All four have adopted postures of humility. All four are speechless, spellbound. All four have been visited by angels. All four recognize that the fragile, helpless child laying between them is unlike any child that's ever been born. This portrait shows how God centers these men in the story of Christ and welcomes them into the Kingdom.

Of all the people in the world to be the first to worship Christ, it was these outcasts, Bethlehem's Shepherds, that were called to Christ. Considering the larger context of religious snobbery and class prejudice, God's son stepped forth and handpicked lowly, unpretentious shepherds to first hear the joyous news: "It's a boy! And he's the Messiah!" While these shepherds have become a mainstay in the church traditions for thousands of years, the religious experts and leaders of that era have faded into obscurity, conspicuously absent from the invitation list. Christ himself will go on to identify himself as "the good shepherd" who "lays down his life for his sheep."<sup>18</sup>

As utter outliers, their hearts must have leapt to hear the angels' message: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Even them? Yes, even them! Outcasts no longer. The outsiders have been brought in, the misunderstood have been heard, the strangers have been made welcome at the table of God.

### C. Reflection: God's Refining Work

There is much we can learn from these shepherds—and their religious counterparts—that I think is obvious, so long as we acknowledge that many of us are far less like these shepherds than we may care to admit at the moment. But allow me to say this: ***attempting to shield God from our weaknesses short-circuits God's holy, refining work.***

So often, we seek to hide our doubts and fears and spiritual aches and pains from God. We want him to see us at our best. And in so doing, we miss out on how God can reach into our broken, hypocritical lives—because of those very weaknesses—and make his strength perfect within us.<sup>19</sup> This understanding should *revolutionize* the way we think about ourselves. It should lead us into deep humility when celebrated by the cheers of our peers, and it should refresh us with hope when confronted by our darkest failures. We can begin to learn how to, as Paul says, delight in our weaknesses, our insults, our hardships, our negative perceptions, and our difficulties. "For when we are weak, then we are strong."<sup>20</sup> Our doubts and fears and shortcomings are not something we should shield from God—they are the very things God

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<sup>18</sup> John 10:11.

<sup>19</sup> 2 Corinthians 12.

<sup>20</sup> 2 Corinthians 2:10-11.

reaches into and works through to transform us into his emissaries and witnesses.

If you don't believe me, look—in verses 15-20—at how the Shepherds respond to the hospitality of Christ. They are overjoyed! Notice the verbs: going with haste, seeing, knowing, worshiping, making it all known, glorifying and praising God. God's hospitality and promise-keeping has transformed these lowly, untrustworthy shepherds into God's first missionaries.<sup>21</sup> There is no hint of skepticism in them, no discussion about going to see *whether* what they have been told is true. They have become men of faith, and upon seeing the newborn cradled in his mother's arms, also became men of action. Keep in mind who these people are—they are the least theologically trained, least recognized, and some of the most disrespected of that day. The odds are stacked against anyone giving them the time of day. And yet these shepherds—who gave no lectures or sermons—manage to go about igniting wonder and awe in all who heard them. Their message was simple: “We have seen him with our own eyes, and we must let you know. Everything has changed.” These shepherds didn't worship God in the abstract; they offered their bodies as “living sacrifices.”<sup>22</sup> God's strength, transforming weakness, and made perfect.

## II. THE COLLAPSE

In the Shepherds, we have seen a compelling glimpse into the Kingdom of God in how it was inaugurated through the Shepherds receipt of and response to the Gospel through the hospitality and lordship of Jesus Christ. But the shepherd's uplifting narrative doesn't make this moment a sentimental one; their admission into the Kingdom of God is revolutionary! That is because God's Kingdom is the inverse of the societies that we build. In God's Kingdom, the poor, the marginalized, the people without power or privilege are welcomed to the table of God. And in that sense, we can also see that the shepherd's admission into this Kingdom is itself a judgment on the kingdoms of this world, kingdoms who see their power begin to collapse.

### A. Mary's Magnificat

When we read today's passage, you may have noticed a curious verse that seems out of place from the rest: verse 19. There, Luke notes “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” I believe Luke is drawing the reader's attention back to Mary's prayer in Luke 1. Known as the “Magnificat” (Latin for “magnify”), this prayer is given immediately after her encounter with Gabriel, when Mary learns that she will give birth to the long-awaited Messiah. The prayer contains some of the most theologically rich Biblical prose in all of scripture. It is also one of four hymns Luke's uses in his “infancy narrative” poetic declarations are also given by Zechariah (Luke 1:67-79), the angels' (2:13-14), and later on, Simeon (2:28-32). Notably, the Magnificat is the only one of those four spoken by a woman—it is also the longest set of words spoken by any woman in the entire New Testament. And yet, growing up in the church, I can't recall ever hearing a single sermon that focused on exegeting her prayer.

For our shared benefit, I will read the Magnificat in full:

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<sup>21</sup> Jeff Cook, “O Come Let Us Adore Him”, Providence Bible Church (2019).

<sup>22</sup> Romans 12:1-2.

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant.

For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed;  
for he who is mighty has done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.

And his mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.

He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts;

he has brought down the mighty from their thrones  
and exalted those of humble estate;  
he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and the rich he has sent away empty.

He has helped his servant Israel,  
in remembrance of his mercy,  
as he spoke to our fathers,  
to Abraham and to his offspring forever.”<sup>23</sup>

What a powerful, moving prayer. Mary links her son to the impoverished, cruel experience she and virtually all of Hebrew population experienced.<sup>24</sup> The Messiah that Mary anticipates is referred to as the Mighty One who topples rulers, scatters the proud, and sends the rich away empty-handed. He also is mindful of the lowly, exalts the humble, fills the hungry with good things, and helps His servant, Israel.<sup>25</sup> Upon seeing the shepherds arrive at the invitation of angels, it is no surprise then that Mary would treasure and ponder all these things!

Let's be clear, then: Mary's words aren't sentimental. Dietrich Bonhoeffer described the Magnificat as “the most passionate, wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary hymn ever sung.”<sup>26</sup> Bonhoeffer wasn't the only one to have reached that conclusion; political bodies in Guatemala, India, and Argentina have banned the Magnificat from being recited in public for

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<sup>23</sup> Luke 1:46-56.

<sup>24</sup> Poverty was widespread both in rural and urban areas throughout the Roman empire. Biblical scholars often underestimate the overwhelming poverty that defined the Galilean region in particular, where as many as 90% of Hebrews experienced subsistence-level poverty. S.J. Friesen, “Injustice or God's Will? Early Christian Explanations of Poverty”, included in S. Holman, *Wealth and Poverty in the Early Church and Society: Holy Cross Studies in Patristic Theology and History*. Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI.

<sup>25</sup> Luke 1:51-53.

<sup>26</sup> “The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings....This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind.” See Edwin Robertson, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer's Christmas Sermons*, Zondervan 2005.

their galvanizing effect on the poor and marginalized.<sup>27</sup> That response shouldn't surprise us. In contrast to the shepherds—who relinquished their power and livelihood (their flocks) in response to Jesus—the authorities of Mary's time responded to Jesus's arrival by weaponizing their power to protect their livelihoods: we see this in Herod's infanticide against Bethlehem, his successor's drunken murder of John the Baptist, and the unjust murder of Jesus himself.

And yet, note the futility of their violence and control. Herod's cruelty in Bethlehem has no effect on preventing the end of his reign, which is barely a footnote in Luke's gospel.<sup>28</sup> By deliberately disregarding Herod's act, Luke uses the tools of narrative to show his readers how powers and authorities will wither and fade under the shadow of the cross. Luke is showing us that neither Caesar in Rome, nor Herod in Jerusalem, nor Pilate as governor, nor all the presidents and premiers and executives and generals that have come after them will ever be "king" in any true sense. All kings of this world hustle to try and keep their thrones. They are panic-stricken, fearful of everything and everyone as a threat, unfamiliar with any methods besides force and violence, littering human history with misery. These kings and their kingdoms fade, Jesus' almost unnoticeable arrival brings the beginning of an unending Kingdom. He is not robed in splendor, but swaddling clothes. He is placed not in the royal nursery, but in the manger of an overcrowded home. And yet he, note they, is the true King, ruling a Kingdom which will have no end. Where they have cultivated fear, he brings joy. Where they have cultivated oppression, he brings justice. Where they have cultivated suffering and sorrow, he brings wholeness and delight. The advent of his Kingdom means the collapse of theirs. And Mary can't help but ponder it all.

## B. Luke's Audience

There's also something deeper going on here. The author of this passage, Luke, is a practicing doctor. He has gone about selecting eyewitness accounts to shape the final form of his gospel. And his audience, both in the gospel of Luke and his subsequent book, Acts, is the "most excellent Theophilus." Theophilus is widely considered to be a person of significant Roman social and political status. This means both Luke and his audience are likely quite well-off, beneficiaries of a society keen to respond to the poverty of Mary and the shepherds with revulsion, not awe. And yet Luke's narrative deliberate confronts his status and the status of his readers: while religious and political leaders—the very people who should have understood Jesus' ministry—consistently fail to comprehend what Jesus' is all about, simpler, often marginalized, everyday people quickly grasp the gift of new life Jesus offers them.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> During the British rule of India, the Magnificat was prohibited from being sung in church. In the 1980s, Guatemala's government considered Mary's words about God's preferential love for the poor to be too dangerous and revolutionary; the song had stirred Guatemala's impoverished communities and inspired them to believe that change was indeed possible. And after the Argentinian Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo—whose children "disappeared" during the Dirty War—placed the Magnificat's words on posters throughout the capital plaza, the military junta outlawed any public display of Mary's song.

<sup>28</sup> Luke 3:1, which references the murderous Herod's successor.

<sup>29</sup> It is a pattern of "when those who should don't, while those who shouldn't do." Michael Card, "Major Themes", *Luke* (p.23-24). Intersity Press, 2011.

That pattern of elevating the simple and humbling the proud must have been unsettling to people like Luke and Theophilus. The signs of social misery and backcountry values were likely countercultural, if not even “sinful” in some sense, to Luke’s upscale, prosperous audience. Beyond that, oppression was unlikely to be front of mind for Luke’s readers. They would not have perceived a need for some kind of God-given, universal peace. The Roman military and the market forces were seeing to that just fine, at least for them. In fact, most were probably in denial about how the Empire’s forces supplied the successful with prosperity and tranquility. Would Luke’s audience see their imaginations stimulated by the joy and the mystery of this incarnation narrative? What would his first readers do with all the examples of marginalization, illegitimacy, social exclusion, and poverty at every turn in Luke’s presentation?

To answer that question, we should first examine ourselves. Although we might prefer to see ourselves among the people who “get it”, some of us should first acknowledge we have far more in common with the social situation of Luke and his well-off audience than we do Mary and the shepherds. We may, like Luke and his audience, feel disconnected from an urgent imperative for justice because we have been insulated from the shock of injustice. And unlike the shepherds (who relinquished their power and livelihood), we may, like Herod, be tempted to use whatever power or influence we have obtained to preserve our livelihood and comfort, even when doing so it comes at the expense of others. Do not be quick to answer these questions dismissively; Luke is setting up his whole narrative to challenge a particular audience for a particular reason, and we would be foolish to quickly consider that challenge conveniently inapplicable to our lives.

C. Reflection: Jesus is Lord

There is much more we can say in response to this challenge. I cannot speak for you, only myself and my shortcomings in this regard. But allow me to say this to all of us: ***Jesus Christ is Lord, and that is not a matter of your opinion or mine.***

Here’s what I mean: when Jesus is described by the angels to the shepherds back in Luke 2, they announce his titles in rapid succession: *Savior*, *Christ*, and *Lord*. These terms are deeply political and carry political consequences. They are a declaration that Jesus is the King, and that anyone or anything else claiming that title—anything portending to a power or authority in this world—is a deceiver, a usurper destined for destruction, empty of life, completely vacuous. So, when we get weak-limbed and say things like “I believe Jesus is Lord, but that is just my personal opinion” what we are speaking is utter nonsense.

“Jesus is Lord” is a declaration of loyalty. The church is supposed to be a community of people standing together as a kind of political alternative to every nation, witnessing to the kind of social life that is possible for those that have been formed by the story of Christ. The main task of the church is political, in that sense, not because it is adhered to a particular party or platform or politician, but because it is going about the business of forming people who see clearly the cost of discipleship and are willing to pay that price. That is, after all, why Jesus refers to his rule and

reign as a “Kingdom” that is not of this world. That is why we must never reduce the living, demanding, all-consuming reality of Jesus’ lordship over the world to a “matter of our opinion.”

### III. THE CHOICE: the Cross or the Powers

Jesus’ welcoming of the Bethlehem shepherds into the Kingdom of God, and Mary’s pondering of their role in the Messiah’s work, places us as at a fork in the road: we must choose between the violent ways of the Powers (exhibited by Herod) or the peaceful ways of the Cross (exhibited by the shepherds). This is the very temptation Satan lay before Jesus in the Wilderness; it cuts to the heart of what it means to follow a crucified Messiah in a world ruled by violence.

#### A. The Way of the Powers

In scripture, the “powers” are supernatural forces that wage war against God and his Kingdom. While the world is described in the Bible as the handiwork of God and the object of his affection, it is also used to describe an evil regime that has invaded and taken up residence in that once-perfect creation.<sup>30</sup> That “world” does not welcome its Creator, or his people, because it has been saturated with hostile supernatural “powers” and “principalities” coordinated by the Devil himself.<sup>31</sup> This is why John’s gospel refers to Satan as the “prince of this world”<sup>32</sup> and Paul describes him even more shockingly as the “god of this world.”<sup>33</sup> This Enemy, and these powers, form an empire of cruelty, envy, violence, falsehood, greed, and desolation. They use deception, temptation, and everyday experiences to shape our imaginations and affections away from God. They bring chaos down like rain, sow injustice like seeds, and infect us with fear. And while these powers cannot separate us from God’s love,<sup>34</sup> they contend against God’s followers all the same. They will remain a terrible enemy until the end, when death is the “last enemy that shall be destroyed.”<sup>35</sup> This is the “present evil world”<sup>36</sup> to which Paul says we must never be conformed,<sup>37</sup> and against which we stand as more than conquerors.<sup>38</sup>

Now, that may all sound very sinister and in-your-face, but the reality is much more insidious, much more beneath the surface, much more difficult to detect. That is why it has been so profoundly impactful in our communities: the lure of power to just go and “get things done” can catch any one of us. Jesus himself is familiar with this temptation: He heard it before in the wilderness.<sup>39</sup> When Satan approaches Jesus in the desert and tempts him to consume a little food, demand angels prevent his injury, and lay claim over the whole world, Satan’s strategy wasn’t about getting Jesus to pursue something other than being Messiah. No, Satan’s aim was

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<sup>30</sup> 1 John 2:15. When God appears in this “world” he is described in scripture a “stranger” who was in the world...yet the world knew him not” (John 1:10). Jesus encourages his disciples not to fear this “world” because he has already overcome it (John 16:33).

<sup>31</sup> Colossians 1:16; 1 Corinthians 2:8; Ephesians 1:21, 3:10.

<sup>32</sup> John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11.

<sup>33</sup> 2 Corinthians 4:4.

<sup>34</sup> Romans 8:38.

<sup>35</sup> 1 Corinthians 15:26.

<sup>36</sup> Galatians 1:4.

<sup>37</sup> Romans 12:2.

<sup>38</sup> Romans 8:31-39.

<sup>39</sup> Luke 4:1-3. See also Matthew 4:1-11 and Mark 1:12-13.

to keep Jesus *from going to the cross*—to get him to accomplish his messianic goals through shows of divine power and spectacular triumph, not sacrifice and death. Jesus encounters this same temptation again in the gospel of Mark, where Peter confronts Jesus after the Messiah anticipates his rejection and murder.<sup>40</sup> It isn't that Peter doesn't want Jesus to be the Messiah; he objects to the way Jesus is going about *being* the Messiah. Peter wants a king full of power, one who will drive out Israel's enemies in a triumphant display of power. But Jesus rebukes Peter in drastic fashion, linking Peter's words back to Satan's wilderness temptation: "Get behind me, Satan! You do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns."<sup>41</sup>

In both temptations, **Satan makes it plain that he is opposed to the cross, and to a cross-shaped Messiah.** Consistent with the larger theme in Luke we have previously discussed, where the powerful are laid low and the weak are exalted, Jesus' rebuke of Satan's temptation to convenience and power calls into question our own idolatries. Whereas we might see power and prestige and wealth as levers that can be pulled or water that can be channelled, Luke would have us see them as threats, perhaps even Satanic temptations.

Allow me to illustrate. This year, I have had the joy of rediscovering C.S. Lewis' famous fantasy series: *The Chronicles of Narnia*. One chilly Friday morning, my 3-year old son, Martyn, sat down with me while I read *The Lion, The Witch, and the Wardrobe*. By the end of the day, we had finished the book, cover to cover. Meeting the Pevensie children, Mr. Tumnus, the Beavers, and of course Aslan the mighty lion, was an imagination-igniting experience for Martyn. And as we have read more books, the Narnia world has provided all kinds of opportunities to talk about good and evil, sacrifice and love, and the author of *the Story*: God himself. I have told Martyn on more than one occasion that I am enjoying the books even more now, with him, than I did when I was a kid and discovered the stories for the first time. I have been moved by many of the powerful symbols and ideas contained in these stories, which still have much to say to us.

One example that struck me relates to one of Narnia's chief villains: the White Witch, Jadis, who has conquered Narnia's free people for a century and established a cold, cruel regime where it is "always winter but never Christmas." In the Narnian tales, the Witch stands against Aslan—the story's Jesus figure—and nearly conquers Narnia once and for all before meeting her defeat. In the very next book, some Narnians seek to resurrect the White Witch through dark sorcery. Why? Simple: for her power. The Narnians have tried to rely on Aslan, but he hasn't shown up. They're running out food, soldiers, and morale. Eventually, the exhausted Narnians turn treasonous and suggest calling on the White Witch for her "ancient power." They hope to "use" the Witch to defeat their enemies. Here's one particularly compelling part of the debate:

*"And anyway," Nikabrik the dwarf continued, "what became of the Kings and their reign? They faded too. But it was very different with the White Witch. They say she ruled for a hundred years. A hundred years of winter! Now, there's power if you like. There's something practical...I say, if you can't help my people, I'll go to someone who will."*<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Mark 8:31-33.

<sup>41</sup> Mark 8:33.

<sup>42</sup> C.S. Lewis, "Prince Caspian" in *The Complete Chronicles of Narnia* (p. 268). Harper Collins, 1998.

This is what is often referred to as a “Faustian Bargain”—when someone trades something of supreme moral or spiritual importance, such as personal values or the soul, for some worldly or material benefit, such as knowledge, power, or riches. Seems applicable today? Doesn’t it?

The temptation of the White Witch is the same temptation we face today. It is the temptation to see power as a means to an end, even while power almost always becomes the end in and of itself. When we ask questions like “How else will God spread the gospel?” or “How else will I protect my family?” or “How else will be satisfied?” or “How else can I right that wrong?” we reveal our captivity to the well-worn ways the Powers have taught us about how to resolve our problems. We are showing that we prefer to “get stuff done” rather than doing gritty, hard work of telling the truth to ourselves and one another.

Each of those “how else?” questions often stem from fears, fears that can be traced back to lies and habits and imaginations that have been shaped by the Powers. We have to be honest about this: we all have picked up well-worn methods of responding to crises in ways that borrow from the Powers and their ultimately self-destructive ways. We may not be as tenacious and cruel as Herod, but we act out of much the same fear and in so doing fail to live into the reality of God’s Kingdom. So long as we are tempted by our fears and our needs, we will be easy targets for the Powers. We must remember Jesus’ teaching: “What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul?”<sup>43</sup>

## B. The Way of the Cross

In contrast to the wicked ways of the Powers, Scripture presents a compelling vision of the Kingdom of God. This Kingdom is radically different than the one that poisons the world around us; it is one where the last are first,<sup>44</sup> the poor are blessed,<sup>45</sup> and the meek inherit the Earth.<sup>46</sup> Citizens of this Kingdom embody this kind of self-emptying righteousness by embracing acts of **shalom**: confession, repentance, generosity, hospitality, reconciliation, and other creative and costly means of disadvantaging ourselves to advantage our neighbors.<sup>47</sup> We associate with the lowly,<sup>48</sup> abstain from vengeance,<sup>49</sup> and overcome evil with good.<sup>50</sup> We choose peace when threatened by the sword,<sup>51</sup> blessings when cursed,<sup>52</sup> and love towards anyone we might consider our enemy.<sup>53</sup> We don’t demand our “rights” at the expense of our neighbors’ welfare—we willingly relinquish them, emptying ourselves in the likeness of our savior,

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<sup>43</sup> Mark 8:36.

<sup>44</sup> Matthew 20:16.

<sup>45</sup> LUke 6:20-23, Matthew 5:1-12.

<sup>46</sup> Matthew 5:5.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce Waltke, *The Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15*. Erdman’s (2004).

<sup>48</sup> Romans 12:16.

<sup>49</sup> Romans 12:17-20.

<sup>50</sup> Romans 12:21.

<sup>51</sup> Matthew 5:9; Matthew 26:50-53.

<sup>52</sup> Mathew 5:44.

<sup>53</sup> John 15:13, Luke 6:27, Matthew 5:43-48, Matthew 5:43-48; Luke 6:27-37; Romans 12:20.

descending rather than elevating ourselves,<sup>54</sup> finding our lives by losing them.<sup>55</sup> This sort Kingdom inevitably leads to solidarity with those we once considered “far off”,<sup>56</sup> especially those most weighed down by the world’s brokenness.<sup>57</sup>

In sum, citizens of this Kingdom are a people shaped by the cross. And that is why Jesus is the rightful King of this Kingdom. “If any man be my disciple” Jesus taught, “let that person forsake all, deny himself, take up his *cross* and follow me.”<sup>58</sup> Jesus is the Messiah who emptied himself, took on the form of a servant,<sup>59</sup> washed his betrayer’s feet,<sup>60</sup> was pierced for our transgressions, and healed us by his wounds.<sup>61</sup> Jesus’ willing death made a mockery of sin,<sup>62</sup> and one day, Jesus will return to make all things new.<sup>63</sup>

Allow me to return to Narnia one more time. In *The Lion, The Witch and the Wardrobe*, one of the four Pevensie children—an especially whiny boy named Edmund—betrays his siblings and conspires with the White Witch so he can become king. Edmund’s plot fails, and he begins to recognize the error of his ways as he suffers under the Witch’s cruelty. Eventually, Aslan heads up a rescue operation and recovers Edmund, but it isn’t long before the Witch marches to Aslan’s camp with a claim on Edmund’s life. Citing the “Deep Magic” that serves as the moral order of Narnia, the Witch states “every traitor belongs to me.” She then points to Edmund and declares “his life is forfeit to me. His blood is my property.”

Surprisingly, Aslan never refutes the Queen’s claims. He recognizes that there is a moral order holding Narnia together, one that can’t be waved aside so easily. Aslan negotiates for Edmund’s life by offering his own in exchange. The Queen gladly accepts. Later that evening, the great lion slinks away to the Stone Table, an altar of sacrifice surrounded by the Witch and her minions. Aslan is mocked, tortured, and eventually killed by the Witch herself, satisfying the “Deep Magic” and paving the way to Narnia’s subjugation in the absence of its savior.

As you may have guessed, things don’t quite turn out that way. After Edmund’s two sisters discover the site of Aslan’s death, the Stone Table mysteriously cracks in two, and Aslan emerges resurrected. The girls are overjoyed, though they don’t understand what has happened. Aslan explains:

*“...though the Witch knew the “Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge only goes back to the dawn of time. But if she could have looked back a little further, into the stillness and the darkness before Time itself began, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a*

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<sup>54</sup> Matthew 20:25-28.

<sup>55</sup> Mark 8:34-35.

<sup>56</sup> Ephesians 2:12-20.

<sup>57</sup> Galatians 2:10.

<sup>58</sup> Matthew 16:24.

<sup>59</sup> Philippians 2:1-11.

<sup>60</sup> John 13:1-17.

<sup>61</sup> Philippians 2:1-9, Isaiah 53:5.

<sup>62</sup> Colossians 2:15.

<sup>63</sup> Revelations 21:5.

*willing victim who has committed no treachery is killed in a traitor's stead, the Stone Table will crack, and even death itself will turn backwards.*"<sup>64</sup>

In Lewis' story, the "magic" of pure, self-sacrificial love that is deeper and older than even the "Deep Magic" of violent, retributive justice. It breaks the Stone Table, destroys the evil Witch's hold on Edmund, and resurrects Aslan to lead the Narnians in a victorious battle that liberates his country, transforms Edmund, and enthrones the children as the rightful rulers of Narnia.

"How else?" questions don't lead us to the choice Aslan makes. His decision is rooted in an understanding that "the way things are" simply isn't the way things must or always will be. It is a decision which illustrates the marvelous, true power found in the self-emptying love of Jesus. And it shows that while both violence and love are powerful, they are not equally powerful. Self-emptying love is much older, much deeper, and the one thing that can bring the dead to life.

"If anyone wants to be my follower," Jesus says, "he must deny himself, take up his cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what does it benefit a person if he gains the whole world yet forfeits his soul?"<sup>65</sup>

### C. Reflection: The Antidote to Sentimentality

When we walk the way of the Powers, we follow the well-tread, spacious, sand-covered path to destruction.<sup>66</sup> We reinforce the same vicious cycles of death that feed the Powers and their plots. But when we choose the other way, the narrow way, thorn-covered, cross-shaped path, we will find life.<sup>67</sup> It is when God's people have been transformed by the life-giving, self-emptying love of Christ, and when we have committed to carrying our crosses, and when our commitment has produced solidarity with the suffering, it is *then* that "our light will shine like the sunrise," says the prophet Isaiah, "and our restoration will quickly arrive."<sup>68</sup>

Today, my final challenge to you is this: allow Advent to be more than a means for rekindling sentimentalism and nostalgia. Let us all consider how we—in our homes, with our roommates and spouses and children—can see this season as an opportunity to detox from the wicked ways of the Powers and refresh ourselves in the life-giving ways of the Cross. If you're not sure where to begin, I suggest Romans 12, where Paul explains what it means for his readers to "offer their bodies as living sacrifices" in gritty, practical terms:

*Love must be free of hypocrisy. Detest what is evil; cling to what is good. Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Give preference to one another in honor, not lagging behind in diligence, fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. Rejoice in hope, endure in suffering, persist in prayer. Contribute to the needs of the saints, and practice hospitality.*

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<sup>64</sup> C.S. Lewis, "The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe" in *The Complete Chronicles of Narnia* (p. 224). Harper Collins, 1998.

<sup>65</sup> Matthew 16:24-26.

<sup>66</sup> Matthew 7:13-14.

<sup>67</sup> Matthew 7:13-14.

<sup>68</sup> Isaiah 58.

*Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse. Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep. Be of the same mind toward one another; do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Do not be wise in your own eyes. Never repay evil for evil to anyone. Respect what is right in the sight of all people. And if possible, so far as it depends on you, be at peace with all people. Never take your own revenge, beloved, but leave room for the wrath of God, for it is written: "Vengeance is mine, I will repay," says the Lord. "But if your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink; for in so doing you will heap burning coals on his head." Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good.<sup>69</sup>*

This. This is the cross-shaped faith. There's nothing particularly sentimental about blessing your persecutors, extending hospitality to strangers, weeping with those who weep, and relinquishing opportunities for vengeance. And yet that is precisely what we are called to do as Christians, and in so doing, we "overcome evil with good."

If we are honest, this vision can sound impossible. And yet, in Christ there is a new possibility among us, rooted in God's love and God's suffering power. Power from God's love can break vicious cycles. We have seen them broken in Jesus, and occasionally, we have even seen them broken in our own lives. We have been promised that one day these cycles will be broken once and for all, and we know that Christmas is *the* reminder that God keeps his promises.

Hauerwas—that critic of sentimental Christian faith—when asked what the antidote was to sentimental faith, answered: "tell the truth." And what is the truth? The way of the cross, not the way of Power. Jesus is lord, MACC family, and Caesar is not. And that isn't just my opinion!

Please join me in prayer.

*Father, in a world where we are tempted to get what is ours, take care of ourselves, and obtain influence and prestige, you call us to overcome evil with good. You call us to empty ourselves to fill others. You call us to carry our crosses, deny ourselves, and follow you. During this time of Advent and waiting for your return, guide us away from sentimental religion and stir within us a commitment to cross-shaped living. Help us to be a people of hospitality, of healing, of humility, and of hope.*

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<sup>69</sup> Romans 12:1-2; 9-21