

Good morning everyone.

Before I begin I want to make a promise to all of you this morning.

I promise I will not bash Hallmark movies or the acting skills of Candace Cameron.

OK?

(And the only reason I make this promise is so don't upset Parks anymore.)

Pray.

Introduction:

A number of years back, My wife Rachel and I had the opportunity to lead a spring break mission trip to Amsterdam with a group of college students from Western Washington University.

As you may know, Amsterdam is very much a post-Christian city. And 15 years ago, when I went, in many ways it looked like Vermont does today. They had already legalized marijuana. They had already legalized gay marriage. And there was even legal prostitution in the city. Most Dutch people had little or no background in the church.

We had gone there to help a brand new Chi Alpha ministry that was starting up in the city, and so a lot of what we did was go out on college campuses and survey students about their religious backgrounds and their spiritual beliefs.

As is often the case with mission trips, I went hoping to influence some Dutch students towards Christ, but I think I ended up coming home more changed than anyone.

And it was because of a conversation I had with a young man that I will never forget.

We were out on campus on a rainy day, and I saw this guy standing outside the library smoking a cigarette. (Now, if your goal is to start up a conversation with someone, a smoker is always a good choice because you know they'll stick around at least until they finish their cigarette!)

So I went up and introduced myself, and it turns out this guy was an American. And we got chatting and he agreed to take my survey.

So I asked him a number of questions about his spiritual and religious background, including the question, "Do you believe in God?"

When I asked him this, he became visibly upset, and he replied something like this: "How could I believe in a god? How can there be a god in this world? Look at what's going on! Wars, famine, orphans in Africa dying of AIDS, torture, disease... if there's a god then he's a real... bleepity bleep (and I'll say 'jerk.') If there's a god then he's a real jerk!"

Now, I could understand where this guy was coming from. After all, questions about evil in our world - questions about pain and suffering - those are tough questions that even the most faithful of Jesus followers wrestle with. And I still struggle with those very same questions, at times, myself.

So I wasn't offended or bothered by his honesty.

But we kept talking. I asked him a few more questions, and finally I asked him his thoughts about Jesus. Who did he think Jesus was?

And his answer could not have been more different. This guy's tone and countenance completely changed: "Oh, Jesus was awesome. He cared for the poor, he fed the hungry. He talked about love and forgiveness. Jesus was an awesome dude." (That's a direct quote by the way: "Jesus was an awesome dude.")

I was blown away: Here was a guy who hated the very idea of God, but Jesus - he thought Jesus was great.

And then a question popped into my mind that, if it didn't change this young man at all, it forever changed me.

I asked him, "What if God were more like Jesus?"

What if God were more like Jesus?

He didn't know what to say. He had never even considered the idea before.

And honestly, neither had I.

Here's the point:

When we think of the word, "god," all of us have some sort of image or idea that comes to mind.

For some of us, 'god' is the grandfatherly figure living up in the clouds with a white beard and long flow-y robe who graciously hands out gifts when we ask him (almost like Santa Claus). Maybe he's like our earthly grandfathers who would sneak us a little extra candy when no one is watching because we really are his favorite - he really does like us just a bit more than the other kids.

For others of us, we project our own broken earthly fathers onto our Heavenly Father. Maybe 'god' is a bit harsh and overly critical. Or maybe 'god' is kind of distant and emotionally uninvolved in our lives. Maybe 'god' demands excellence and performance like our own fathers did. Maybe 'god's' not very good at keeping his promises.

For those outside the church, 'god' can mean all kinds of things. 'God' might even be more like a pagan goddess - a version of Gaia or 'mother earth.' More and more people are turning to pantheism, believing the divine is experienced in nature, in everything.

All of this to say, typically we prefer to shape God into our image - into the kind of god we prefer - than to allow Him to shape *us* into *his* image.

But what we believe about God is not just a matter of theological discourse. What we believe about God - who we believe God is, what his character is like - these things deeply impact the way we *live*.

It affects the kind of prayers we pray.

It shapes the dreams we have for our lives.

Our concept of 'god' influences how we spend our time and our money, how we use our gifts and talents.

But what about Jesus? How does He fit into all of this? How should He shape our understanding of who God is?

If you've been a Christian for any time at all, you probably know and have been taught that Jesus is God. Jesus is a member of the Trinity. Jesus is divine.

The theologian, N. T. Wright, points out that we often ask the question, "Is Jesus God?"

In other words, we think we know what God is like, and the task of a Christian is to figure out if Jesus somehow fits into that mold.

Was this human being who walked the earth a couple of thousand years ago really divine? Does Jesus really fit into our understanding of what it means to be 'god'?

With this question, 'god' is the known, and Jesus is the unknown.

Books like *More Than A Carpenter* and C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* address this very question.

But Wright goes on to say that historic Christianity has actually always asked the very opposite question - a far more provocative and even revolutionary question.

The real question of Christianity is this: "Is God Jesus?"

Is God Jesus?

In other words, we know what Jesus is like. We've seen him in the flesh. We've watched him up close in action, so to speak.

And the question Christianity tries to answer is whether or not the god of the universe - the Creator God who made everything - is that God really like this Jesus?

What might happen if we allow Jesus to define what we mean when we say "god"?

Wright puts it this way:

"After fifteen years of historical Jesus study, I now mean something very different... by the word, 'god.' The portrait has been redrawn." ("Jesus and the Identity of God")

"The portrait has been redrawn."

We are about to celebrate Christmas in a few days, and so earlier we read Luke's account of the birth of Jesus.

This morning I want to ask the question, "How does the Christmas story - how does the story of the birth of Jesus change our understanding of who *God* is?"

If God really is Jesus, then how does the Christmas story redraw our portrait of God?

Luke's Narrative:

Luke begins his story with, "**In those days Caesar Augustus...**"

Caesar Augustus was the adopted son of Julius Caesar.

He became sole ruler of the Roman world after a bloody civil war in which he killed all other rivals for the throne.

He turned the Roman republic into an empire.

And he proclaimed that he had brought justice and peace to the whole world.

He declared that his father, Julius Caesar, was divine. And that he, himself, was the "son of god."

The eastern part of Augustus's empire began to worship him as a god, calling him their 'lord' and 'savior.'

Caesar Augustus represented everything a first-century Roman or Jew would have understand it meant to be a king.

Today we might not have kings and emperors that we worship as gods.

But our culture and our world still have ideas of what it means to be great.

Our gods are more subtle, but they still define for us what it means to be beautiful and successful and powerful and valuable and to live the good life.

And those photoshopped and glossy gods - the celebrities and the Instagram influencers and the impossible standards of beauty and success that we worship - they can be just as tyrannical and cruel and harsh as Caesar Augustus.

They can control our lives and our dreams just as much as a human dictator.

But in a far off corner of Augustus's empire, Joseph and his fiancée - a fiancée pregnant with a **new** king - and a new *kind* of king - travelled to the obscure town of Bethlehem.

They weren't in Rome. They weren't even in Jerusalem. Nope, they were in small and insignificant Bethlehem.

Many historians question why Mary went along for the journey.

Typically only the male head of household would have needed to report for a Roman census.

But some speculate that Mary travelled with Joseph to avoid the scorn and the shame of giving birth at home to a child conceived out of wedlock.

Phillip Yancey, in his book, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, writes:

“Nine months of awkward explanations, the lingering scent of scandal - it seems that God arranged for the most humiliating circumstances possible for his entrance, as if to avoid any charge of favoritism. I am impressed that when the Son of God became a human being he played by the rules, harsh rules: small towns do not treat kindly young boys who grow up with questionable paternity.”

Some of you might recall how, later in Jesus’s life, his neighbors and even some of his family members scoffed at Jesus, “Isn’t this Mary’s son?”

In other words, you know, the one born under morally questionable circumstances?

And when Jesus - this new king - when Jesus was born, it wasn’t in a palace. There were no midwives or court attendants.

There was a crowded house - so crowded, in fact, that there weren’t even any guest rooms, and so Mary and Joseph were most likely forced to stay on the first floor, where animals were usually kept.

There was no crib, just a feeding trough.

What a royal reception this new king received!

I want you to stop and think about this for a moment:

We all know what it means to be like God.

It means power. It means greatness. It means being in charge. It means being the boss. It means having the best, the most, the biggest.

But what do you do with a God who makes his entrance into the world like this?

What do you do with a God who enters the world as a baby who can’t speak?

Who can’t eat solid food or control his own bladder?

Who was dependent on a Jewish teenager just to survive?

What do you do with a God who is humble?

How many of us would ever even use the word 'humble' to describe God?

One writer put it this way:

“‘God is great,’ the cry of the Moslems, is a truth which needed no supernatural being to teach men. That *God is little*, that is the truth which Jesus taught man.” (Father Neville Figgis)

A little God? A humble God?

In the words of John, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. And we have seen His glory.”

This?? This is the glory of God????!!!

How does that redraw your portrait of God?

Well, Luke goes on to tell us that there were a group of shepherds in a nearby field taking care of their sheep.

I probably don't have to tell you that shepherds were despised by first-century Jews.

They were illiterate and considered godless. They weren't even allowed past the outer courts of the Jewish temple. (They also probably smelled.)

And so here you have the entire nation of Israel suffering under Roman occupation...

...longing for the Messiah...

...longing for Yahweh to return and set them free...

...longing for their nation to be restored...

...the Pharisees and the devoutly religious, hoping that by their purity they could usher in God's Kingdom, debating how many steps you can take on the Sabbath before it was breaking the law and considered work... or counting out grains of salt to make sure they were properly tithing...

...you have the Sadducees and the Sanhedrin, the priests and the rabbis, the power brokers of Jewish society all waiting for the Messiah...

...crying out in the words of the prophet Isaiah, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down...” (Is 64:1)

But when the heavens are finally rent - when Yahweh finally returns to his people, who sees it? Who is the first to know? Who sees the heavens open and heavenly hosts praising God?

Shepherds. Outcasts. The marginalized. The forgotten. The nobodies.

I have definitely had moments in my life when I felt like a nobody, and I'm sure you have, too.

Now maybe it was way back in junior high when the cool kids wouldn't sit with you in the cafeteria or you got picked last in gym class,

But maybe it's more recently at your company Christmas party when everyone was focused on that really gregarious and funny co-worker, or busy cozing up to the boss.

Maybe it was when you were passed over for a promotion at work after years of hard work and service.

Or after your spouse passed away and you found yourself home alone one too many Sunday afternoons.

Maybe it's while you're doing one more load of laundry and loading up the dishwasher for the third time today and cleaning up another spilled glass of milk while your spouse is at work and you're stuck at home as a stay-at-home dad or mom.

Or, unfortunately, it might be among Christians when your past seems a little beyond the grace of God, and the baggage and scars you carry make being one of the guys or one of the ladies who "have it all together" seem impossible. "Why would God ever want to use me like he uses them?"

For me, sometimes it's in my work circles when I go to conferences, and colleagues tell stories of the hundreds of students at their meetings, and the dozens of baptisms, and here I am in rural, post-Christian Vermont working in relative obscurity. Does anyone notice?

What do you do with a God, who, rather than announcing his coming with court musicians and proclamations and national holidays, instead shares his good news first with a bunch of nobodies...

...who picks people like you and me?

How does *that* redraw your portrait of God?

Application:

As we celebrate Christmas over the next few days, have fun. Enjoy it. Really celebrate.

If you have kids or grandkids, soak in their sense of wonder and excitement and anticipation.

Have some yummy food. Indulge a little.

But if you can, carve out a few moments to contemplate and to hold this truth of Christmas in your heart.

We celebrate Jesus...

... A king who entered our world by being born to an unknown, unwed teenager in an obscure village in a distant corner of an empire...

...A Jesus whose birth took place not in a palace or temple but in the livestock quarters of an overcrowded house...

...Whose arrival was first announced not to the important and the influential, but the outcasts and the nobodies...

And if this Jesus reveals to us what *God* is like....

If the Christmas story shows us the character and the heart and the face of the Creator God who is the center of all reality...

Then that God is humble and willing to be weak so that we can know Him.

We can draw near to him because we can trust that He is gentle and good.

We can have assurance that even when it feels like we're living our lives in obscurity - even when we feel alone and forgotten - He sees us.

He hears our cries and sees our tears.

We can trust a God like that when He calls us to do hard things - to make sacrifices, to take steps of faith, to turn away from sin, to give up what is good for what is better, to risk in our relationships...

We can trust Him - trust that He is only asking us to do what He, Himself, would be willing to do... trust that He wants what is best for us.

In the words of the Apostle Paul and probably one of the earliest hymns of the church, we celebrate a God and a King...

“Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used for his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death - even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.” (Phil 2:6-11)