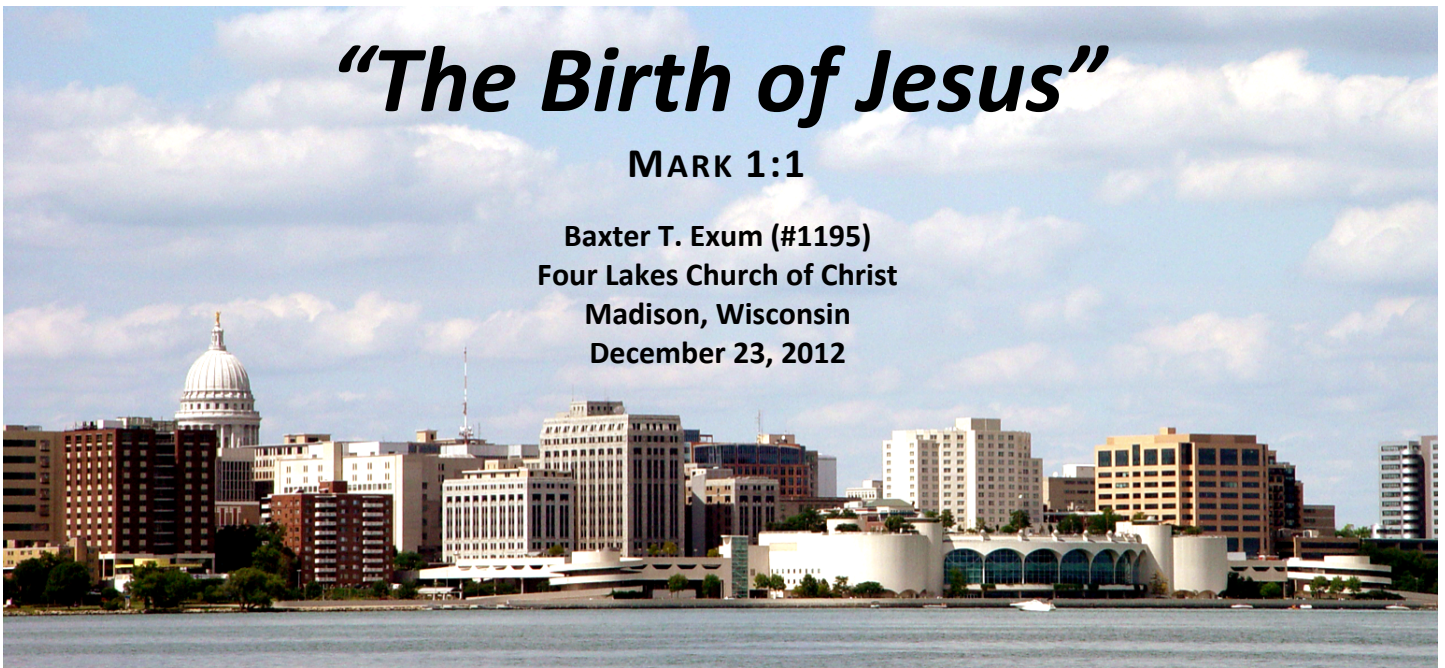


“The Birth of Jesus”

MARK 1:1

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Four Lakes Church of Christ
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Several years ago, the Excedrin Headache Resource Center took a poll to find out what causes most headaches during the holiday season, and as we consider the items on this list, we realize that this could very easily be a schedule of normal activities around this time of year:

1. Fighting crowds and traffic
2. Not getting enough sleep and changing sleep patterns
3. Not having enough time to get everything done
4. Spending too much money
5. Eating or drinking too much
6. Skipping meals because of a busy schedule
7. Getting together with friends and family
8. Cooking and cleaning
9. Long plane, train, or car trips
10. Being apart from friends and family during the holidays

We look at that list, and we think: That is my week! This morning, then, as we try to slow down for just a few minutes, I would like for us to take just a few moments to think about the birth of Jesus Christ. Most of you know by now that I am not one to make a habit of preaching on topics that are tied to various holidays. As a preacher, I do not want to fall into that trap. In fact, over the past 12-½ years, we have only studied the birth of Christ one time during this time of year – that was way back on December 3, 2000, so it has been more than 12 years. This morning, then, as we sort out what the Scriptures actually teach about the birth of Jesus, I would like for us to go back and look again at a question we considered back then, and that is: What is the ONE THING that all accounts of the birth of Christ have in common? Or we might word it in this way: Whenever a New Testament writer mentions the arrival of Jesus on this earth, what ONE DETAIL is always included? This morning, then, as we consider this question, I would like for us to do a brief overview of the various aspects of the birth of Christ, and then I would like to bring it all together at the end by looking at what all of the accounts have in common.

I. And I would like for us to begin by thinking about the MANGER.

Obviously, this is one of the first actual physical items that many people will think about when they think of the birth of Jesus. We realize that several manger scenes can be found at various places around the City of Madison. A number of denominational churches will have manger scenes in front of their church buildings. Down in Janesville, one denominational church would always sponsor a “live” drive-by manger scene with real people standing around the manger, and it was always a popular attraction, as people would drive by that particular church building.

When we look back to the scriptures, we will find that Jesus was, in fact, placed in a manger very shortly after his birth. I would encourage you to be turning with me to Luke 2. You might remember that Caesar Augustus decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire, and the law said that all families were to return and register in their home cities. Mary and Joseph left the city of Nazareth and returned to the small village of Bethlehem. Because of the census, though, all of the rooms were full, and when Jesus was born, he was placed in feeding trough, or manger. Please notice Luke 2:7, ***“And she [Mary] gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”*** Now, in my own mind, I had always assumed that Jesus was born in a stable. After all, that is the picture that we often see on all of the cards. However, as I studied for this morning’s lesson, I learned something, and that is: A stable is never mentioned with regard to the Lord’s birth. All we know is that Jesus was placed in a feeding trough. We could probably assume that he was born in a stable, but he could have been born outdoors. He could have been born in a tent, or a cave, or even in some kind of storage room (as various commentaries have suggested).

The manger scene, though, is an important part of the birth of Christ. It is recorded in the Bible; therefore, God wants us to know about it! However, did you know that the feeding trough is only mentioned in the book of Luke? The fact that it is mentioned in only one of the accounts may or may not be significant, and yet there is something about the coming of Christ into the world that is mentioned in all four gospel accounts, and the manger is not it.

II. Perhaps, then, we could consider the SHEPHERDS AND THE ANGELS.

The shepherds and the angels always seem to go together, and the shepherds and the angels are certainly also very popular. Many nativity scenes today include several shepherds standing around the manger, so they also are a very important part of the birth of Christ. If they were not important, the Bible would not have told us about them. And again, going back to Luke 2, I would like for us to notice what the Bible tells us about the shepherds:

⁸ In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; ¹¹ for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased.” ¹⁵ When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, “Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this

thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us.”¹⁶ So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger.¹⁷ When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child.¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds.¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart.²⁰ The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

We know that when a baby is born today, it is very common for people to send out some kind of birth announcement. Today, we usually hear about it online – complete with pictures and videos. I would suggest, though, that God’s birth announcement blew away all of our modern technology! Here we have shepherds out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks. Imagine what that would be like – taking care of sheep in the middle of the night out in the middle of nowhere. Can you imagine how dark that would be? Think back 2000 years ago and imagine being outside without the glow of city lights on the horizon. At our house, we have the red glow to the northeast – the glow from the city of Madison. But imagine not even having a flashlight, and all of a sudden, an angel of the Lord appears, along with an incredibly bright light. This angel brings a message about the Savior being born, and then suddenly, the shepherds are able to see a **“multitude”** of heavenly creatures praising God. The angels leave, and then the shepherds find themselves in the dark once again.

God had sent his Son’s birth announcement, but he did not send it to the kings, or the religious leaders, or the wealthy, but God sent that announcement to a group of shepherds watching their sheep in the middle of the night. In the eyes of the world, those shepherds were nothing. In fact, in Jewish culture, they were less than nothing. Their work with sheep made them ceremonially unclean. Their work kept them away from the temple for weeks and even months at a time. They worked long hours. They were separated from their friends and families for long periods of time. We remember David (in the Old Testament) working as a shepherd and fighting off lions in order to protect his sheep. Being a shepherd was a difficult and thankless job. And so we learn that earthly power and position meant nothing to God. Out of all of the people on the face of the earth at that time, the gospel (or the Good News) came to them first. These were incredibly humble men. And certainly humility was necessary in order to accept the message. Here is a young unmarried woman, dating a construction worker. If Jesus had been born today, would we be able to accept that? The shepherds were able to accept that, and that is why they are included in the scriptures. However, did you know that the shepherds and the angels are only mentioned in the book of Luke? The shepherds and angels are important – after all, they are mentioned in the Bible – but there must be something else about the birth of Christ that we really need to appreciate.

III. Maybe we could consider the WISE MEN AND THE STAR THAT THEY FOLLOWED.

Please notice Matthew 2:1-12,

¹ Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem, saying,² “Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we saw His star in the east and have come to worship Him.”³ When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him.⁴ Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.⁵ They said to him, “In Bethlehem of Judea; for this is what has been written by the prophet:⁶ ‘And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the leaders of Judah; for out of you shall come forth a Ruler who will shepherd My people Israel.’”⁷ Then Herod secretly called the magi and determined from them the exact time the star appeared.⁸ And he sent them to

Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the Child; and when you have found Him, report to me, so that I too may come and worship Him."⁹ ***After hearing the king, they went their way; and the star, which they had seen in the east, went on before them until it came and stood over the place where the Child was.***¹⁰ ***When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy.***¹¹ ***After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.***¹² ***And having been warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod, the magi left for their own country by another way.***

Most people, when they think of the wise men, they picture three men standing around the manger. In fact, that is the way it is almost always pictured when we see it on any kind of a greeting card. However, did you notice anything about the timing in this passage? Back up in verse 1, these things happened at some point ***"after"*** the Lord's birth. In fact, the wise men did not even arrive in Jerusalem until ***"after"*** the Lord was born. Not only that, but please notice verse 11 – the Bible says that the wise men came to visit the Lord in the ***"house."*** In other words, the Lord was no longer in the manger, but he was in a house of some kind. Not only that, but think about what Herod would go on to do. In Matthew 2:16, we find that Herod tried to kill Jesus by having all of the baby boys in the Bethlehem area killed, ***"from two years old and under, according to the time which he had ascertained from the magi."*** As I look at that passage, it seems much safer to assume that the magi saw Jesus when he was about a year old, and that Herod tried to kill all of the baby boys who were born within one year of that time. This would certainly explain Herod's figure of two years. The wise men, then, did not see Jesus in the manger, but they saw him in some kind of a ***"house"*** when he was probably around one year old.

As we looked at that passage in Matthew 2, I hope we also noticed that we are not told how many wise men there were. As I mentioned earlier, we often picture three; however, we do not know how many there were. They are referred to as ***"men,"*** so there must have been at least two, but other than that, we do not know. They did bring three gifts, and yes, there might have been one gift from each man, but that might not have been the case at all. One of the men might have brought two gifts, or there might have been a bunch of men who went in together on the gifts.

And while we're on this subject, I would point out that the word ***"magi"*** comes from both Hebrew and Greek words that mean "magician, sorcerer, or astrologer." These things were all forbidden under the Law of Moses. It is interesting, then, that these men were not Jews, but Gentiles. And on top of that, they were foreigners. Maybe you can remember a promise from God in 2 Chronicles 15:2, ***"...if you seek Him, He will let you find him; but if you forsake Him, He will forsake you."*** The wise men were searching for the truth, and they found it. God told us about the wise men for a reason. As Gentiles, we can relate to these men. But did you know that the wise men and the star are only mentioned in the book of Matthew? They are important, but there is something else about the birth of Jesus that we really need to understand.

IV. Maybe we should consider the TOWN OF BETHLEHEM.

And again, Bethlehem is often pictured on cards. We sing about the "little town of Bethlehem." Nearly everyone understands that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. I say "nearly" everyone, because there is one major denomination in the world today that teaches otherwise. If you talk to someone from the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (commonly known as the Mormons), they will most likely offer you a copy of the Book of Mormon. If I were you, I would accept the book, and then ask one of their very young "elders" if they know where Jesus was born. They will say Bethlehem. At that point, turn in their book to Alma 7:10. That

verse makes the prediction that the Savior will be born of Mary in Jerusalem. And so, the Book of Mormon makes a false prediction about the location of the Lord's birth. Notice: Herod did not ask the magi where the Lord was to be born, but he asked the religious leaders, and in response to that questioning, they religious leaders were unanimous in their conclusion that the Lord was to be born in Bethlehem, even though not all religious groups today will accept this.

From the Bible, though, we know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. In fact, a prophecy about Bethlehem was made several hundred years before Jesus was actually born. In Micah 5:2, the Bible says, ***"But as for you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you One will go forth for Me to be a ruler in Israel. His goings forth are from long ago, from the days of eternity."*** And so we see that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem (and not in Jerusalem). Matthew refers to this prophecy in Matthew 2:5-6. Bethlehem, then, is significant. You might remember that Rachel was buried in Bethlehem. In Bethlehem, Ruth and Boaz fell in love and were married. And in Bethlehem, David took care of his father's sheep and was eventually anointed by Samuel to be king. Bethlehem, then, is an important city. It proves Old Testament prophecy. And yet in the New Testament, only Matthew and Luke specifically point out that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. There must be something else that we need to understand.

V. Perhaps, then, we should consider THE ACTUAL DAY OF HIS BIRTH – maybe this is the thing we need to remember.

Many people, of course, celebrate December 25 as a religious holiday, or "holy day," but did you know that the day of the Lord's birth is never mentioned in the scriptures? We don't even know the month. And we don't know, because the date of the Lord's birth is never mentioned in the Bible. It is interesting to me that we can figure out the date of the crucifixion and resurrection, but we really do not know exactly when the Lord was born. Have you thought about the fact that the Lord had 32 or 33 other birthdays, but we are never told how or whether he celebrated? Even when we look at the writings of the early church – nothing!

So why do many people celebrate the birth of Christ on December 25? I found the best and most concise explanation several years ago in an online encyclopedia, "The Roman Catholic Church chose December 25 as the day for the Feast of the Nativity in order to give Christian meaning to existing pagan rituals. The Catholic Church hoped to draw pagans into its religion by allowing them to continue in their revelry while simultaneously honoring the birthday of Jesus." As I continued to look into this, I found something that I had not heard before. Maybe some of you are already familiar with this, but the Pilgrims and a majority of people in colonial America did not celebrate the Christmas holiday. In fact, at the Plymouth Plantation Museum in Plymouth, Massachusetts, they still do not celebrate or decorate in any way for the Christmas holiday (even though this would be to their financial advantage in modern society). Instead, in an effort to be historically accurate, they abstain from all things Christmas, and they have an interesting explanation on their website. On their website, they have historical documents from that time, showing that December 25 was a day like any other. On one occasion, those on the Mayflower were given an extra ration of beer, but that was about it. The following year, some newcomers tried to celebrate by playing games and taking the day off, but Governor Bradford confiscated the games, and they were told to keep their celebrations private and only in their own homes. The website for the Plymouth Plantation puts it this way, "The Separatists and Puritans, finding no warrant for Christmas in the Bible, simply rejected the day as one of the nefarious human inventions of which they sought to rid the church." Another source put it this way, "The reason for Bradford's opposition to Christmas was not mean-spiritedness but profound religious conviction. The men and women who founded New England were determined to purify and simplify religious belief and practice. They wanted to 'prune away' everything that was not directly commanded or described in the Bible. Thus, rituals, prayer books,

vestments, statues, stained glass windows, all had to go. So to did saints' days and other 'holy days'..." [Old Sturbridge Village Web Site].

They were so serious about their beliefs, in fact, that several years later (May 11, 1659), in the Massachusetts Bay general assembly, a decree was actually recorded that set in place a fine for anyone celebrating Christmas. The fine was set at 5 shillings for anyone who took a day off of work, had a feast, played cards or dice, or in any other way was found to be celebrating a holiday like Christmas – a day that was a dishonor to God. My goal here is simply to point out that December 25 is never mentioned in the Scriptures. We learn, therefore, that the day of the Lord's birth must not be the most important thing for us to remember.

There are so many other details that we could go on to consider, but so far this morning we have learned that the common thread in all four gospel accounts is not the manger, not the shepherds or the angels, not the wise men or the star, not the village of Bethlehem, and certainly not the day of his birth.

VI. Instead, the common denominator in all four gospel accounts of the Lord's birth is the fact that JESUS CHRIST IS GOD'S SON IN HUMAN FORM.

In Matthew 1:18, the Bible says that Mary *"...was found to be with child by the Holy Spirit."* In Mark 1:1, Mark starts his gospel account by saying, *"The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."* Luke explains in his version of events that *"...the Holy Offspring shall be called the Son of God"* (Luke 1:35). And in John's account, the Bible simply says, *"In the beginning was the Word, and the word was with God, and the Word was God...and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us"* (John 1:1,14). Even the apostle Paul referred to the Lord's birth in Galatians 4:4, *"But when the fullness of time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman."* The one common element in all references to the birth of Jesus is that Jesus is God's Son. His purpose in coming to this earth was not so that we could celebrate the manger, and the shepherds, and the angels, and the star, and Bethlehem, and the wise men. These are important details – they are important details because they are in the Bible – for some reason God told us about these things. But in the big picture, the most important truth about the coming of Jesus is that He is, in fact, God's Son. In fact, believing in the birth of Christ is one of the most important facts in the Christian faith. We think of what the apostle John wrote many years later as he warned about false teachers. In 2 John 7, he said, *"For many deceivers have gone out into the world, those who do not acknowledge Jesus Christ as coming in the flesh. This is the deceiver and the antichrist."* Acknowledging that Jesus came in the flesh is crucial to the Christian faith.

Because he is God's Son, Jesus was able to do things that no other human being could do – things that only God can do. He turned water into wine. He raised people from the dead. He fed thousands with only a small handful of food and had baskets full of leftovers. He walked on water. He healed. He brought back sight. And then, after 3-½ years of public teaching and preaching, Jesus was killed, executed, nailed to a cross, and one of the most common accusations was that Jesus had claimed to be God. If we could think about that for just a moment: Normally, we feel sorry for people like that. If somebody claims to be God, we don't kill them – we protect them, we make sure they get some intensive therapy, we make sure they are taking all of their medications, we try to evaluate whether they are a danger to themselves or to others, we feel sorry for them. But the Lord Jesus was not a mad man. Instead, he really was God's only Son! And after he was killed, he came back, he went back to heaven, he left his inspired apostles, and now we have the New Testament as a record of what the Lord wants us to know. He wants us to know that he came to solve the problem of sin. He came to remove the barrier of sin. He came to remove the separation that took place when we sinned.

Conclusion:

This morning, I would like for us to be thankful that Jesus, as God's Son, did, in fact, come to this earth in human form. If he had not been born, he could not have died, and if Jesus had not died, all of us would still be lost, with no chance of ever being saved on our own. The fact that Jesus came to this earth, then, is good news, and as Christians, we are responsible for telling others – that Jesus is God's Son, that Jesus died and was raised from the dead, and that we imitate that sacrifice by being crucified ourselves. According to Romans 6, we die to sin, we are buried in the water of baptism, and we are raised up to live new lives.

If you have not actually been immersed in water making the appeal to God for a clean conscience, we would love to talk with you to discuss any questions you might have. If you have something we need to pray about, let us know. But if you are ready to become a Christian immediately, you can let us know by coming to the front as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: fourlakeschurch@gmail.com