



**Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church**  
Sanford, North Carolina

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**Christmas Ponderings**  
**Luke 2:1-20**

Children have been waiting all year for it. Adults have been preparing weeks for it. Christmas is almost here! This Thursday, to be exact! Three days, twelve hours and about twenty-eight minutes . . . !

We've been getting ready, haven't we? Christmas specials (few of which really have anything to do with the reality of Christmas) have been running on TV since Thanksgiving. Several radio stations have been playing all-Christmas-music-all-the-time for a month or more now. There have been parades and programs, sales and specials, suppers and socials, parties and poinsettias, laughter and lights.

But those things aren't really what Christmas is ultimately about, are they?

Let's refocus this morning. In our worship throughout Advent, we've been preparing to celebrate *Christmas*. Deep down, that's what we want to do, isn't it? Listen again to how it all began . . .

**Luke 2:1-20** <sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> And all went to be registered, each to his own town. <sup>4</sup> And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, <sup>5</sup> to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. <sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. <sup>7</sup> And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

<sup>8</sup> And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. <sup>10</sup> And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people.

<sup>11</sup> For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup> And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,

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<sup>1</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations in this sermon are from the *English Standard Version*.

<sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those  
with whom he is pleased!"

<sup>15</sup> When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." <sup>16</sup> And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. <sup>18</sup> And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup> But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. <sup>20</sup> And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

### ***In a stable in Bethlehem . . .***

Come with me in your imagination for a few minutes to Bethlehem that night so long ago, to the mouth of that cave that served as a stable.

Like any other cave, it's damp and cold and dark. Can you smell the stench? The cave itself would be musty enough, but there have been animals here, and maybe they're still here—cattle and donkeys and who knows what else except sheep. They're out in the fields with their shepherds keeping watch over them by night.

The crude inn simply was not the appropriate place for the birth of a baby. So Joseph has found this place, a place that will offer them some privacy. We don't know who this stable-cave belonged to, but this is where the Christ child has entered the world just a few hours ago.

Despite his carpentry skills, away from his tools and carpenter shop Joseph has no way of making a crib or a cradle. But he has improvised. He's found a feeding trough, a manger, that's big enough to hold the baby. He's carefully filled it with fresh hay while Mary has wrapped the baby in swaddling cloths like any good Jewish mother of her day would, not only to keep him warm but to keep his limbs straight and strong.

And there's Mary, holding Jesus.

Can you see the love and the wonder and the marvel shining in her eyes?

The shepherds have already been, and they've told Mary and Joseph how the angels came and told them of the birth of this one who would be the Savior. They've gone to tell others what they've experienced and seen.

And now it's just Mary and Jesus and Joseph and the animals in the damp chill of the night.

Even though she's exhausted, Mary can't sleep. She's tenderly caring for her new baby, the Savior of the world!

As she holds him and looks into his face, she thinks about everything that's happened. It's all been so strange, all these things that have happened in the past ten months or so. Angels' visits, a miraculous pregnancy, the imperial announcement and the journey to Bethlehem, the angelic announcement of Jesus' birth to the shepherds.

Each memory and each thought she carefully examines, and then she places it in a safe place in her heart, like she's putting away a precious treasure. And she *ponders* them all, thinking deeply about them, wondering about them, contemplating, meditating, marveling.

Surely she must be pondering the angel Gabriel's visit when he announced to her that she would bear the Messiah without a human father. Either part of that was really beyond comprehension, but she had submitted to the Lord in faithful obedience.

No doubt she's pondering in amazement God's gracious favor in choosing her to be Messiah's mother. Here she is, a poor peasant woman from Nazareth in Galilee, a village that some devout Jews wonder aloud whether anything good could come from it (John 1:46). Yet God has chosen *her* to bring His Son into the world!

And then she looks over at Joseph, dear Joseph. Quiet, yet strong, righteous and compassionate and loyal. And she ponders how in the face of what seemed impossible, he trusted God, and trusted her, and took her to be his wife in spite of how things must have looked to the neighbors.

And then she thinks of the shepherds. It must have been quite a shock when so shortly after the birth, these smelly shepherds came searching this stable-cave, looking for a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger! But come they did. And they stood—or maybe kneeled—and watched this little one the angels had told them was the Savior, Christ the Lord!

What could all this mean? As she ponders, it's more than she can wrap her mind around. Just what would God do through *her* little baby? And her heart floods with awe and wonder and joy and amazement—and maybe just a little *fear*.

### ***In a sanctuary in Sanford . . .***

As we worship on this fourth Sunday of Advent, this Sunday before Christmas, we can learn a lot from Mary. She treasured up everything that happened surrounding Jesus' birth, and pondered these things in her heart.

Shouldn't we do the same?

You see, *Christmas calls us to ponder the mystery and the marvel of the incarnation of Christ!*

It's struck me deeply for many years now, but it seemed to stir something in me even more deeply at our sanctuary choir's presentation of our Christmas musical last Saturday and Sunday.

I was sitting down close to the front both nights and could see little Graydon Carpenter up close as he and his parents portrayed the Holy Family. As he lay in the manger moving his little arms around and grasping some hay in his hands, and as shepherd Jeff with his steady hands lifted him high in the air for the finale—it hit me all over again. *That's how God the Son came to earth!* As a helpless little baby who had to be fed and changed and washed and carried and cared for! Why in the world would God do it that way?

But He did! And so we have to ponder some things at Christmas.

Ponder for a moment God's eternal, redemptive purpose in Christ and its fulfillment. God had a plan, and in Jesus, it all came together! He sent His Son into the world at just the right time. He had announced that He would come through His prophets, and now He had brought it to fulfillment in the birth of the Christ-child.

Ponder God's sovereign orchestration of history and circumstances to bring it all to pass at precisely that point in history. While most of what the Greek empire and its heirs and the Roman empire did were far from God's will, God worked His will through what they did to orchestrate the exact situation that would be the right time for the Messiah to come.

Alexander the Great and his successors had made *koiné* Greek the common language of the ancient Mediterranean world. While every country or nation had its own native tongue, most anyone who had to do business knew at least a little Greek. And many spoke Greek as easily as

their mother tongue. That set the stage for the communication of the gospel, the good news about Jesus.

The Roman Empire had established what was, for that day, an excellent system of roads that made land travel much easier than before, and in many cases, much safer. Since they had a presence on the Mediterranean Sea as well, sea travel was seldom threatened by those who would rob or do mischief to ships. All this set the stage for the gospel to be carried to the nations.

And in an amazing turn of events, a haughty emperor's decree for a census to be taken provided for circumstances that allowed Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, yet grow up in Nazareth! Now ponder all that for a moment.

But as astounding as all those things are, perhaps the most amazing thing to ponder is just what happened in *the Incarnation of Christ*, when God the Son took on human flesh. John puts it this way in his gospel (John 1:1-5, 14)<sup>2</sup>:

<sup>1</sup> In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. <sup>4</sup> What came into being in him was life, and the life was the light of people. <sup>5</sup> And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

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<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and pitched his tent among us, and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only-begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth.

You see, my brothers and sisters and friends, *that* is the mystery and the marvel of the Incarnation! *God in the flesh!*

You know, as Mary pondered, she must have wondered about what Jesus would be like, and how He would do what God the Father was sending Him to do.

We know—at least to some degree—because we've heard the whole story.

Because you see, in our Christmas ponderings, we see that even as Mary held her little baby, the cross was already casting its shadow across the manger. And if we look carefully with eyes of faith, we also see that beyond the cross lies the crown!

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<sup>2</sup> My translation.