

## “Salvation in Flesh”

Reading: Matthew 1:17-25; John 1:1-14

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I have to say that it feels a little strange to be reading the Christmas story in September, and as a pastor, it's doubly difficult to know how to preach on it since I know I'm going to be preaching on it again in a few months. But even so, I'm glad that we've come to the chapter in *The Story* on the birth of Christ when it isn't Christmas, because as much as I love Christmas, it's *Christmas*. We have weeks of songs and readings and decorations and traditions leading up to Christmas, and they're great, but none of that came before the actual birth of Christ. Jesus was just *born*, and very few people even noticed at first. So today we have a rare opportunity to hear the story of Jesus' birth again, but in a unique way. We get to experience it in a way that we don't normally get to in the midst of our celebrations. We get to tell of Jesus' birth especially focused on its context in the larger story.

This is the 22<sup>nd</sup> week we've been reading through *The Story*. We've watched as God's people have gone into slavery and out into freedom, as they've struggled against invaders and raised up kings, as they've been through idolatry and revival, as they've built their nation and watched it be destroyed and then rebuilt it after their time in exile. It's a long story, and as we pointed out last week, we might start wondering whether God really has much of a plan at this point. I mean, yes, there have been some high points and some saints along the way, but how much progress have we really made toward the redemption of the entire creation that God made, loves, and hasn't given up on? The same basic problem is there all along: that humanity is infected with sin, and that sin keeps leading us back into rebellion against God. If we haven't really made much progress in one little nation of God's own people after all this time, how long will it take to save all of creation? At this rate, the world will never be reconciled to God.

And so all along, there has been this sense of anticipation. God apparently hasn't given up yet, so let's keep waiting to see what else He has up His sleeve to save us. There's always been this awareness among God's people that it is the Lord who saves us, but the definition of salvation has changed from generation to generation. At different points along the way in our story, different generations have needed saving in different ways, and so there is always this recognition that we don't know what God might do among us, but we're still waiting on Him to save us.

I think of Abraham near the beginning of our story, the forefather of God's people whose act of faithfulness first opened the book on God's redemption of the world. Abraham and Sarah needed salvation from childlessness, which in their culture especially meant passing on without anyone to remember you or carry on your name. God provided them with a son. I think of Joseph, who needed salvation from his jealous brothers, and God eventually provided him with a position of power in the Egyptian government. His brothers, meanwhile, needed salvation from a famine, and God provided for them through Joseph's position. God's people later needed salvation from slavery in Egypt, and God saved them through the dramatic events of the Exodus. Or I think of all of the stories of the judges and the kings who faced invasion and war, and the many ways God surprisingly defeated their enemies. There were times when the prophets showed the people the way to salvation from famine or plague or natural disasters. And then God saved the people from their seventy-year exile in Babylon. Salvation meant many things as the generations passed.

And that brings us up to the end of the Old Testament, where we were last week. Four hundred years pass between then and where we are this week, with the birth of Jesus. There's a lot that happens in that time, and God's people still find themselves looking for salvation. The Old Testament ends with the Persians in charge, and they were generally pretty good rulers and God's people were more or less content under them. But then the Persians were conquered by Alexander the Great, and after Alexander's death God's people were ruled by a succession of empires culminating in a ruler who effectively outlawed Jewish religion and tried to force God's people to make sacrifices to idols. So again, they needed salvation. This time it came through a family that led a guerilla-style revolt, today known as the Maccabean revolt. They established a Jewish kingdom, free from any foreign control, and they were saved! Until different parties started vying for control, and political intrigue ran rampant, and someone invited the Romans to come and support their bid for power, and the Romans decided not to leave. And that was the situation in Jesus' time: God's people once again needed salvation from foreign oppressors.

Through all of this there was that hope of a salvation that would last. Maybe, one day, God would do something so powerful that salvation would stick around, not just for a generation or two, but forever, and not just in the neighborhood of God's own people, but all over the world. It was great that God saved them in those times of crisis, but wouldn't it be better if He saved them so much that the salvation stuck around? And so they started looking for that one who would come and bring true, lasting, far-reaching salvation, not just someone who spoke for God but someone who came from God, not just another king but the bringer of an eternal kingdom. There were whispers and hints from the prophets of such a Messiah. There were clues about where He would come from and what He would do, how He would not only bring back the glory days but would bring something even better, and more than that, He would bring the people back to God. And so they waited. And God kept saving them, but they still waited for a greater salvation.

And the question for them really becomes, "What does it mean to be saved?" It's not "will God save us?" or really even "how will God save us?" or "when will God save us?" It's a question of what salvation is, at its root. When God protects us or delivers us from an enemy like Pharaoh or the Babylonians, is that salvation? Well, yes, but that's just a glimpse of a larger salvation, it seems, because another enemy could come along any time. When God heals us from sickness, is that salvation? Well, yes, but again, as great as it is to be healed, it's not everything we're hoping for in salvation. When God provides for us and sustains us, like He did when He gave His people bread and quail to eat in the desert, is that salvation? Yes, but you'll get hungry again. And on top of it all, there's that deeper issue of sin: you may be saved from trouble, but what happens when you rebel against God again?

So as we look back over our story so far of God's saving action in history, we see that His people have found salvation in all sorts of things. Sometimes they found it in an event: the Exodus was salvation. Sometimes they found it in a place: go to the temple, and that's where salvation is. Sometimes they found it in a teaching or a writing: the Torah, the law God gave through His prophet Moses, this is salvation because it tells us how to live. Sometimes they found it in a personality: a king, a government, a judge, a hero. Sometimes they found it in battle: the Maccabean revolt, the conquest of Canaan. Sometimes they looked for it in things: their wealth, their idols, their city walls. Many times they were saved for a time, but it didn't last.

We do the same thing. Their story is our story. We distill the idea of salvation into something or someone we can manage. “At this place I was saved!” and that place becomes a temple to us, almost an idol. “This event, when I was healed, was when God saved me!” and we stay in that moment and never move on. “If I have enough money, or power, or the right person to love, then I’ll be happy!” and we settle for a shadow of salvation.

We learn many things about salvation as we read the story of Christ’s birth, but there are two things in particular that I want to notice today. The first is what we see in Matthew’s gospel. More than any of the others who told the story of Jesus, Matthew took pains to show how Jesus’ birth fulfilled what was promised about the Messiah and connected Him to what went before. He even begins his account with the genealogy of Jesus, tracing His lineage back through the exile, through David, and through Abraham, three of the great focal points of God’s salvation history. Matthew is constantly quoting Old Testament writers and prophecies: this man is the fulfillment of what they were writing about and hoping for.

What we see from the start in John’s account of Jesus’ life is that this fulfillment of the hope of the ages is not an event, not a place, not a thing, and not an institution. Salvation is a person. Salvation is found in the presence of the person of God Himself. What does John say? This Word that is God has been from the beginning; He was there at the very moment of creation. He is light, He is life, He is greater than the darkness, the evil world does not recognize Him because He is not part of it, and yet He put on human flesh to make His dwelling among us. This is no normal Messiah. He is no normal person. He is such a person that He is salvation in flesh. His very presence is salvation.

You see, we’re not saved when we’re healed from an illness or delivered from an enemy; we’re saved when God is with us. And that’s been the case all along in our story, if you think about it. When God’s people entered into battle and were saved, they never claimed to save themselves through great strategic thinking or strength of arms, they always claimed that the Lord showed up and fought for them. When they went to the temple to offer sacrifices, it was because that was where the Lord’s glory shone. When a king or judge saved them, it was because the Lord was with them. When the people heard the words of the prophets or the law of Moses proclaimed, it was because God spoke to those prophets. What saves us is the presence of God, because what we really need, more than any healing or deliverance or rescue, is God’s presence among us. And the problem that faced God’s people all throughout our story so far is that God would arrive and save them, and then over time they would slip back into their rebellion and reject Him all over again.

But now, at this moment in the story, as the Word becomes flesh and dwells among us, something new is happening. God has arrived — in person, in the flesh, as one of us — not just to be with us, but to personally provide us with a way to break that rebellion. This is something different. This is what was foretold, a salvation that would last forever and spread around the globe because God has arrived and intends to stay. Today we’re just seeing the beginning of this new age in God’s saving grace, but it’s already something powerfully different. The Word has become flesh.

And so we are faced with the question of what we’re looking for in our salvation. Do we want only the trappings of salvation — healing, or rescue, or provision — those things we genuinely need but are only a glimpse of the fullness of salvation? Or are our eyes also on the person who *is* salvation, Jesus, the one whose very presence saves us, the one who is calling us to know Him and live

in Him to be saved forever and completely? Do we know *Him*, or are we merely looking for what He can give us?

### **Prayer of St. Patrick**

I arise today  
Through the strength of heaven;  
Light of the sun,  
Splendor of fire,  
Speed of lightning,  
Swiftness of the wind,  
Depth of the sea,  
Stability of the earth,  
Firmness of the rock.

I arise today  
Through God's strength to pilot me;  
God's might to uphold me,  
God's wisdom to guide me,  
God's eye to look before me,  
God's ear to hear me,  
God's word to speak for me,  
God's hand to guard me,  
God's way to lie before me,  
God's shield to protect me,  
God's hosts to save me  
Afar and anear,  
Alone or in a multitude.

Christ shield me today  
Against wounding  
Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me,  
Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me,  
Christ on my right, Christ on my left,  
Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down,  
Christ in the heart of everyone who thinks of me,  
Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me,  
Christ in the eye that sees me,  
Christ in the ear that hears me.

I arise today  
Through the mighty strength  
Of the Lord of creation.



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