

## ***CHRISTMAS CARDS YOU WILL NEVER SEE***

### **Luke 1:26-38**

Well, it is that time of the year again when, as the song says, “**it’s beginning to look a lot like Christmas.**” Of course some people have been getting ready for a long while. I think Christmas starts showing up at Hobby Lobby by the end of the summer. By October and certainly in November, the commercial side of this holiday is in full swing.

Usually by Thanksgiving or shortly thereafter, **Christmas cards begin showing up** in our mailboxes, and for some people, it is an opportunity to send out their family newsletter or photos. When you look at these cards, it is interesting to see what images get used to convey a sense of the holiday. You see landscapes, very often old farm houses, deep in winter snow, lights on in the house. Or you may see a small New England town nestled in the hills, also surrounded by deep snow, and maybe a horse-drawn sleigh somewhere bringing in a tree from the woods cut for Christmas. You might have pajama clad children with wide eyes standing before a floor full of presents on Christmas.

**You see snowmen, reindeers**, redbirds, ice-skaters, bells and ribbons, mistletoe and pine cones, candles, and angels. Interestingly, the angels pictured on most Christmas cards are never the sort that might scare someone half to death!

**The religious cards** might show shepherds overshadowed by angels announcing the birth of the Savior. You see a lot of cards of three wise men with a bright star pointing them to a little village where the Christ-child was to be born. You see a lot of cards of an imagined manger scene, where both the humans and animals are decidedly focused on a small baby laying on a pile of hay. Everyone and everything looks so serene.

It’s amazing really that these are the images that come to us, images of Christmas. It’s amazing because that isn’t the image given to us in the Word of God. I want you to think about that. Think about some Christmas cards you will never see.

**You will probably never see a Christmas card with Mary on it looking like a scared teenager.**

The image of Mary that is typically seen shows her looking like a young woman with nothing but humble awe on her face at being chosen to be the mother of the Messiah. And I’ve no doubt that she was humbled by that, and in awe about that, but I am sure of one thing, in addition to this being a great honor, it was also a life-changing crisis. In fact, when you read about the angel coming to her in the first place, Luke tells us that her first emotion was that she was “greatly troubled” by the angel’s first words. Most scholars believe that she was probably still in her teens. This was not some woman who was born and grew up with wealth and power. Yes it is true that she’s engaged to be married, but how ready was she to become a mother already? The angel tells her these amazing things.

- He says, “you have found favor with God.
- He says, you are going to conceive in your womb and give birth to a son whom you will name Jesus.
- He says, this child will be great and one day be called “the Son of the Most High God.”
- He says, God is going to give to him the throne of his father David. In saying that, Mary would have immediately understood that God has chosen her as the one through whom the Messiah would come.
- The angel said to her this son would reign over the house of Jacob forever, and be the ruler of a kingdom that would never end!

We know the story and so we take what the angel said with no problem, but don’t you know, that poor girl just had a bomb dropped on her! She didn’t get up that morning expecting any of that, I’m sure! Maybe she had been thinking about her engagement and marriage to Joseph. Maybe she was concentrating on her chores, or any of a hundred other things, but this...this was too much, too quickly! Look at how she responds. **Verse 34** says she said, “*How can this be, since I am a virgin?*”

In our country where over a million teenager girls get pregnant every year outside of marriage, what happened to Mary may not seem like such a big deal, but in a small Jewish community like Nazareth, assuming that is where she lived, the news just delivered to her must have been almost overwhelming! Furthermore, in Jewish law, any woman who got pregnant outside of marriage was subject to being stoned to death.

The repercussions begin almost immediately. Matthew’s gospel tells of how Joseph decides to settle the matter quietly by giving her a divorce. That was in lieu of what he could have done had he decided to press the Law on the matter. So for at least a short time, Mary’s world had to be spinning. First she is pregnant, now she is about to forfeit her right to marry, she is going to be buried under the scandal of it all! Months will go by, awkward questions, difficult answers. Have you ever wondered how the grandparents must have felt? The inspired records never mention them, but most likely there were some grandparents. When they learned of Mary’s pregnancy, was it joy or shame they felt first? Did they have to do as many parents and grandparents today—swallow hard, when their daughter or granddaughter tells them she’s expecting?

Mary remembers something else the angel told her, how that her relative Elizabeth, although quite past the age of bearing children, is also going to have a baby, a son who will prepare the way for Mary’s son. And so, Mary leaves Galilee and goes to hill country not far from Jerusalem, and spends several months with the one person she could talk to, and where she could be somewhat hid from the stares and whispering of people back home.

When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, Mary returned to Galilee, and don’t you know that it had to be hard? How could she or Joseph explain? Who would believe them? Have you ever thought about why Joseph took Mary on that trip to Bethlehem? She wasn’t needed for the census but maybe he was afraid to leave her alone in Nazareth.

So think about it: one Christmas card you will never see is that of Mary, this scared, pregnant teenage girl!

**Or, how about another Christmas card you will never see: It is a picture of a small Judean village and you see a small band of soldiers marching out, leaving behind a bloody massacre of small children.**

If I was a betting man, I would wager you will never see that card at Christmas. It is such a dissonant note played against that heavenly chorus of angels who proclaimed, "*Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.*" No, this is not one of the favorite Christmas stories, the massacre of the little children of Bethlehem.

I know what the world is doing when it comes to the Christmas holiday. They are recalling and trying to celebrate that incredible time when God came into the world to make a way of salvation possible. But in bringing that event to the attention of the world, there is a human tendency to clean it up just a bit, to sanitize it for public consumption. Some things do not get shown on the stage, or pictured on the cards. The slaughter of the infants in Bethlehem is one of those.

Matthew is the one who best preserves for us this account. Luke tells us that this all took place in the days of Caesar Augustus, but Matthew tells us that a king named Herod ruled over Judea, and of course that would have been at Caesar's appointment. Interestingly, there is not much in the way of history regarding this man. He most famous for the massacre of the children in Bethlehem, but we know from what information we do have, that he was an extremely unstable and cruel despot. He had two of his own brother-in-laws put to death, ordered the execution of his own wife, and two sons. Josephus tells us that just a few days before his own death, he ordered the arrest of hundreds, if not thousands of Jews. The purpose of that was so that at the time of his death, they too would be put to death, thus insuring there would be great mourning in Judea at his death.

Scarcely a day went by in Judea when someone wasn't executed for some reason or another. So, when Herod learned through the coming of the wise men from the east that a king had been born, you know that it was not news that he was going to receive well. **Matthew 2:3** says, "*When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled...*"

He made some discreet inquiries and learned that this birth had taken place in Bethlehem, and so to make sure that no rival king had an opportunity to create problems for him, or to give Caesar a reason to get rid of Herod, he just did what any good despot would do. He ordered Roman troops to Bethlehem to find and kill this potential threat to his rule. Just to make sure that the potential ruler didn't slip through, he ordered that of all male children in Bethlehem under the age of two to be killed. Matthew tells us that this was a fulfillment of a prophecy by the OT prophet Jeremiah, "*a voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they are no more.*"

That isn't one of the Christmas cards you will likely see, but it is a reminder that when God came into the world, it wasn't a world that needed another holiday, it was a world that was in need of help, and rescue, and forgiveness.

**And then finally, one other card you will never see at Christmas is the disgusting conditions under which the Son of God was born.**

I know most of the time when scenes of his birth are pictured for us, that you see a fairly clean stable, a shed like structure, with a clean swept dirt floor, piles of fresh hay, a brightly burning lantern that spreads a warm glow over the small infant laying in a soft looking bed of hay, wrapped in a clean cloth, with Mary and Joseph, some shepherds and the wise men looking on, with a cow or a lamb or two near by. Again, that is the sanitized version, but I know a lot of you grew up on a farm, and you know what a cold, stinking mess a stable can be.

Imagine the desperation of Joseph, and he comes back to Mary and reports that the possibly one inn in Bethlehem is already full, and there is no more room, and Mary says to Joseph, "Well we have to find some place and quick because this child in me is beginning to come!" This was not "home sweet home!" Many scholars believe that it was likely something like a cave. This was a place where the animals were herded into when the weather turned bad. There would not have been any light to turn on, no broom with which to sweep it out and get it ready for any kind of use by humans. It would have been a desperate choice because there was no other choice, and in all likelihood, it would have been a cold, filthy place, not a place at all where you would want your wife or daughter to be when it came time to deliver a child. The manger in which Jesus was born? That wasn't an adorable bassinet, folks! A manger is a feeding trough! Did you know that? They placed him in a feeding trough because that was the best place they could find!!!

I can only imagine that both Joseph and Mary must have thought to themselves, "This can't be happening!" And yet it was happening, and this young, poor, very scared teenage girl and the man who was her husband, had no choice but to give birth right then and right there. One can only imagine the smell of that place, its filthiness, and the utter despondency of it all!

Of this much I am: No one there that night was wearing haloes. No one thought, "This is beautiful!" No one was singing "O Holy Night!" We don't know who delivered the baby, probably Joseph, but for sure, there were no well-trained doctors dressed in sterile medical garb. The picture of that night, the night our Lord was born would not be one that proud parents would keep pulling out to show family and friends.

Now, why am I telling you these things? I'm telling you these things because the truth is what sets you free; the truth, not fantasy! The truth is, God did come, and we have no reason to doubt the story of the birth of Jesus just as it is related in the gospels of Matthew and Luke. But the truth is also that the story the world has heard and promotes has been cleaned up, sanitized, made palatable if you will. The truth is much of the world is unprepared and

unwilling to hear and know the truth, whole truth and nothing but the truth about why that baby was born, whenever it happened!

(Incidentally, isn't it interesting that none of the inspired gospel writers tell us what day Christ was born? The closest thing to a date we get in the gospels is that it happened sometime during the days when Herod was the king of Judea. Luke tells us it was during the time when Caesar Augustus was the Emperor of Rome and a fellow named Quirinius was the governor of Syria! Isn't it interesting that nowhere in the New Testament, not anywhere in the things that the apostles were commanded to preach and teach is there even any suggestion that Christians would or should set aside a day to commemorate the birth of Jesus? Where did that come from? It came from uninspired men. I'm not saying that there is anything wrong with wanting to remember and honor the birth of Christ, anymore than say, remembering and honoring his baptism, or His feeding the five thousand for heaven's sakes! I'm just saying, "keep your eye on that! You didn't get that from God.")

The truth is, God did not come into this world in the person of His Son so He could be remembered as a babe in a manger. He came in order to take on the hard, dirty work of defeating sin and death on our behalf. He came to die on a cruel Roman cross, offering Himself as a sacrifice for each one of us. That's what He wants to be known for. That's what He wants remembered. The only memorial He gave us is this Lord's Supper that we shared a little while ago, and what was that for? Paul told us, "*as long as we eat this bread and drink this cup,*"(1 Corinthians 11:26) we are proclaiming what? *We are proclaiming the Lord's death.*"

I also remember something else Paul said. In **1 Corinthians 2**, Paul wrote: "*And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified.*" Really that's the picture that needs to be on the front of every Christmas card, or a picture of an empty tomb, or a picture of the resurrected Christ, or of Him sitting at the right hand of the Father in heaven. But I don't think the world wants to think much about that. It finds it easier to think happy thoughts about a baby in a manger than a God dying on the cross for them. So that's why I wanted you to think about some Christmas cards you will likely never see, but you should.

Over the next few weeks you are going to see and hear a lot of people talking about "keeping Christ in Christmas," and "the real reason for the season." And I know what they mean, and I know that sincere, well-meaning believers are saying those things, but I wish they would let him out of Christmas! I wish they would let

Him out of that manger, and place Him where God has exalted Him—to His right hand in heaven. I wish they would not just adore Him as a babe in a manger, but submit to Him as their Savior and Lord. I wish the Lordship of Christ wasn't just something seasonal. I wish it was a mindset that affected everything we think, say and do every day.

Is Christ my Lord? That's the question we all need to keep asking ourselves, isn't it? He is the Lord, there is no question about that. The only question is, is whether or not He is your Lord.

And if you haven't made Him your Lord by believing in Him, by repenting of your sins and by being baptized into Him, and by living each day in humble submission to Him, then let me encourage you to give some serious thought to making that happen. If you are ready to do that now, will you come while we stand and sing!