

Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14, & Luke 2:1-20 – December 24, 2018 (Christmas Eve)

When a child is born, there are questions we typically ask. I know when my daughter was born, the only thing going through my mind was, “Is she healthy? Is she safe? How am I going to possibly take care of this little squirming, crying thing?”

Her doctors and nurses had much more specific questions in mind. “Is she alert? Are her lungs clear? Is she eating enough?” Meanwhile, friends and family members were asking much more lighthearted questions. “What did you name her? Who does she look like? When can I see her?”

But there are other questions we never expect to hear at the birth of a healthy child. Who would ever ask, “How will you handle her funeral arrangements someday?” Or, “What cemetery do you think she’ll be buried in?” Or, “What do you think her cause of death will be?” That’s absurd. Totally inappropriate. Unthinkable.

And yet, that’s exactly what we hear in the hymn *What Child Is This?* One verse, we’re looking down on Jesus asleep in Mary’s arms as angels and shepherds praise him. The next, we’re describing in gruesome detail about the way in which He’ll die. It’s a really unusual aspect of this Christmas carol, which we heard beautifully sung by Breck Campbell just now.

Then again, Jesus was a pretty unusual baby. His mother was a virgin, after all. He was conceived by the Holy Spirit. His birth was announced by an army of angels. So, answering the question “What child is this?” is actually pretty important. We’ve all gathered here this evening to celebrate the birth of Jesus. But who is He, really?

Well, the angels themselves give us a solid starting point: “*I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*” What Child Is This? This Child is no less than the Lord Himself. The Lord of heaven and earth.

The Lord whose voice spoke creation into existence now coos and cries in His mother’s arms. The Lord who told the shepherd Moses not to come near because the Lord’s presence was too holy now invites other shepherds to draw near to Him as He lies in a manger. The shepherd Moses hid his face from the Lord lest he be overwhelmed by God’s glory, but now these shepherds behold the Lord’s face in the face of a baby.

The God we could never approach is now approachable. The God who struck fear into the hearts of Israel’s enemies is now inviting. The Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace is now a human being, born to Mary. A child, wrapped in swaddling cloths.

That is good news. But it’s not just good news for someone else. It’s good news for us. “*For unto you is born... a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.*”

What makes God’s appearance in human flesh good news of great joy is that He came in order to save us. The Lord of creation became part of His creation in order to recreate what man had broken. The immortal, eternal, everlasting God was born in a specific time and place to be with His mortal creatures. Creatures who are mortal specifically because of our own sinfulness.

What if the Lord had taken on flesh in order to confront mankind and demand payback for the sins committed against Him? What if He had appeared among us with a human face in order to scowl at us for our selfishness? What if He had come simply to show us His rage at our idolatry?

He could have. But He didn’t. The angels bring good news of great joy for all people. They bring the news not of God’s war against humanity, but of peace on earth. Peace between God and man that hadn’t existed since the Garden of Eden.

And that good news, that peace on earth that Jesus brings, isn't simply because He's born. It's because of that absurd, inappropriate, unthinkable question that our hymn posed to us.

“What child is this... and how will He die?” Because He will die. He was born to die. It was God's plan from the foundation of the earth. This is what the angels are talking about when they say His birth will bring peace on earth. He will die because of us. He will die for us. He will die to bring us peace.

This Child who was conceived by the Holy Spirit will die for those whose sinful hearts conceive only greed and lust and selfishness. This Child who was miraculously born of a virgin will die for those whose sinful hearts give birth to cruel and hurtful thoughts, words, and deeds. This Child who will live a perfect life will die for those who live totally imperfect lives. For unto you is born a savior. For unto us – sinners – this Child is born.

“Nails, spear shall pierce Him through, the cross be borne for me, for you.” The Word made flesh, the Son of Mary, crucified for us. Who, as Titus said, gave Himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession.

What Child Is This? This is a real human child with a real human body. And that real human body was nailed to a cross and died a real death. And that real human body was wrapped up and laid in a tomb.

But on the third day, that real human body rose from the dead, just as He said He would. The firstfruits of the resurrection of the dead. The first of many brothers – you and me – who will rise from the dead one day. This Child is the resurrection and the life. Jesus Christ, our Lord.

After a child is born, we ask all sorts of questions. But before this Child was born, the prophet Isaiah answers all our questions.

He said all authority would be upon this Child's shoulders. And so Christ used His authority to free you from hell and destruction. He said this Child would have the lips of the Wonderful Counselor. And so Christ comforts your troubled conscience with the most wonderful counsel you could ever hear: “I forgive you all your sins.”

He said this Child would have the hands of the Mighty God. And so Christ took those mighty hands and allowed them to be nailed to a cross. He takes those mighty hands and He hands you his own Body and Blood for the forgiveness of your sins.

He said this Child would have the arms of the Everlasting Father. And so Christ spread out His arms on a cross to draw you to Himself. To wrap His arms around you in Holy Baptism. And to welcome you home as a father welcoming prodigal sons and daughters.

He said this Child would have the royal head of the Prince of Peace. And so Christ's head was crowned with thorns in order to place on your heads crowns of glory. In order that we might all have peace with God through His blood.

What Child Is This? This child is the grace of God, bringing salvation to all mankind. This Child is the Lord who has saved you.

So do as Isaiah did and tell all the world that to us a Child is born and to us a Son is given. Do as the shepherds did, running to Bethlehem to see this thing that had happened, which the Lord made known to them. “Haste, haste to bring Him laud,” “Hail, hail the Word made flesh,” “Joy, joy, for Christ is born, The babe, the son of Mary.” Amen.