

**Sermon preached by Dr. Neil Smith at Faith Evangelical Presbyterian Church,
Kingstowne, Virginia, on Monday, December 24, 2012
Christmas Eve**

HOPE DISGUISED

Luke 2:1-20

You have heard the story. Most of us have heard it lots of times before. For many of us, though, I'm afraid the way we picture the story of Jesus' birth in our minds is not the way it really was. We tend to romanticize and sentimentalize the birth of Jesus, when there really was nothing romantic or sentimental about it.

Mary was pregnant. She was going to have a baby. And Joseph was not responsible. He was not the baby's father. God was. It is a mystery that defies explanation. Mary's pregnancy was a God-thing. The child to whom she would give birth was the very Son of God – God incarnate, God in flesh and blood.

But the birth of this baby – the birth of Jesus – did not take place in the way we would have written the story. As Charles Wesley notes in one of the many Christmas carols he wrote, Jesus was “Born a child, and yet a King.” He was “Born to reign in us forever.” (From *Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus*).

If He was a king – and He was, and is – shouldn't Jesus have been born in a palace or some other royal setting? Isn't that where we might have expected His birth to take place, amid the wealth and splendor of royalty?

But no. Mary and Joseph, to whom she was engaged, were both from Nazareth, an inconspicuous, insignificant little town in Galilee. They were not rich. Though they traced their lineage back to King David, they had no pretensions of royal status or power. Joseph, of course, was “just a carpenter.” Not that there is anything wrong with being a carpenter. There isn't. It is as dignified as any other vocation. You can glorify God by working with wood every bit as much as you can by becoming a missionary – if being a carpenter is what God has called you to be.

You can see that from outward appearances, there really was nothing about Mary and Joseph to make you think that Mary's baby could be – would be – the very Son of God.

Because of this requirement to go to one's ancestral hometown to register for the census (for me, I suppose, it would involve a trip back to Smith's Corners in Rockland Township, PA), Joseph had to make an 80-mile journey from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea. Mary probably didn't have to go with him, but Joseph most likely wanted her to come along for at least two reasons: 1) to get away from Nazareth and all the gossiping tongues whispering about Mary's pregnancy out of wedlock; and 2) because he didn't want to miss the birth of Mary's baby. He wanted to be with Mary when the baby was born.

So, because of an edict by the emperor in Rome, Joseph and Mary went to Bethlehem, which was a small town a few miles from Jerusalem. When they got there, and the time came for the baby to be born, they couldn't find a place to stay. There was no vacancy, no room, in the inn. There is no suggestion that the innkeeper was mean to Mary and Joseph. There just wasn't any room available. The only place they could find was a stable. Even the stable was probably not what we picture it to have been like. It wasn't warm and comfy. More likely it was a cave used as a shelter for animals – cold, dark, and damp – with feeding troughs or mangers carved out from the walls of the cave. As already noted, there was nothing romantic or sentimental about either the place or any of the circumstances of Jesus' birth. Except, of course, that it was all part of God's plan. It was all part of His sovereign plan for the salvation of sinners like me. And you.

It certainly was not the kind of atmosphere in which the Jewish people and their leaders expected the Messiah to be born – even though they knew, from the Bible – from the Book of the prophet Micah (5:2), that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. Even so, I'm sure they were sure that the Messiah would be born in royal surroundings.

A cold, dark, damp, smelly shelter for animals? This is how the Son of God makes His grand entrance onto the stage of human history? This is how the God of all things – the God of the universe, the God of all creation, the God of the past, present, and future, the One who is God from everlasting to everlasting, the God for whom nothing is impossible, the God who is sovereign in all things and over all things – this is how He chooses to introduce the Savior of the world and the Hope of the nations? Yes. Yes. And yes again.

Hope. The Hope of the world disguised as a baby lying in a manger. The incarnation of the Jewish people's messianic hope swaddled in long strips of cloth to keep Him warm. Concerning the circumstances of Jesus' birth, one writer observes that “everything points to obscurity, poverty, and even rejection” (Leon Morris). Another writes that “the most powerful person ever born entered the world in total simplicity and humility” (Darrell Bock). Everything about the birth of Jesus was clothed in humility.

I guarantee you that is not the way it will be across the pond in England when the first child of Prince William and his wife Kate is born. But it was that way when the very Son of God took on our humanity and entered this world. It went beyond His birth, though. In one of his books (*Five Smooth Stones for Pastoral Work*), Eugene Peterson writes: “Though there were auspicious signs that preceded and accompanied His birth, preparing the world for the majestic and kingly, the birth of Jesus itself was of the humblest peasant parentage, in an unimportant town, and in the roughest of buildings. (Jesus) made a career,” he goes on to say, “of rejecting marks of status or privilege: He loved lepers” [untouchables], “washed the feet of His disciples, befriended little children, encouraged women to join His entourage, and, finally, submitted to crucifixion by a foreign power.”

Hope in disguise. Royalty in disguise. Not unlike, I suppose, Prince Edward in Mark Twain's story of *The Prince and the Pauper*. Prince Edward meets a poor peasant boy named Tom (not Tom Sawyer, but a different Tom ☺), and the two boys discover they look exactly like each other. Neither of them likes life as they know it, so they decide to swap places and

see what life is like from the other side. Tom takes on the life of Prince Edward, and Edward adopts the life of the pauper Tom. Things get really interesting when King Henry, father of the real Prince Edward, dies, and Prince Edward becomes King of England. But who will believe that one who appears to be nothing more than a poor boy in rags is the true heir to the throne?

The royalty of Jesus was disguised. His identity as the promised, long-awaited Messiah was disguised. Not from everyone, though. Think about this: To whom was the birth of Jesus first announced? Not to the emperor Caesar Augustus in Rome. Not to Herod, the governor in Jerusalem who fancied himself a “king.” And not to the guardians of the Jewish law. Not to the members of the religious hierarchy of the Jews in Jerusalem. The announcement of the Savior’s birth was given first to a group of ordinary shepherds taking care of their sheep out in the fields. It was given to ordinary folks just trying to do their best to make it through life. People like us. All of us who need a Savior. Which is *all* of us, isn’t it?

The message of the angel to the shepherds was not complicated: The baby in Bethlehem whom the shepherds would find wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger was (and *is*), in fact, our Savior – *the* Savior, Christ the Lord (Luke 2:11-12). “Christ equals “Messiah.” “Messiah” equals “Christ.” They mean the same thing: God’s anointed One. God’s chosen One. The Savior and Deliverer God promised to send to His people.

This message was first given to this group of shepherds. But it wasn’t meant for them alone. I know it wasn’t for them alone because the angel said: “I bring you good news of great joy that will be” – for whom? – “for all the people” (2:10). For *all* the people. For *all* of us. For *everyone* who will accept this message. For all who will put their hope in Jesus. For all who will put their trust in Him and Him alone as Savior and Lord of their lives.

In his classis book *Knowing God*, J. I. Packer says of the coming of Jesus into our world: “The message of Christmas is that there is hope for a ruined humanity – hope of pardon, hope of peace with God, hope of glory – because at the Father’s will Jesus Christ became poor and was born in a stable so that thirty years later He might hang on a cross.”

“Hope for a ruined humanity.” You don’t have to look very far to see the ruins and begin to understand what a mess humanity has made of life in this world. Sometimes it is hard not to despair of hope. Everywhere we turn, we find violence, bitterness, hate, injustice, deceit, and oppression – evil in all its ugly expressions. How can we possibly hope to overcome it all? The answer is Jesus, who said: “In this world you will have troubles, but do not lose heart. For I have overcome the world” (John 16:33). Where can we possibly find hope for a ruined humanity? In Jesus, who came to us as a helpless baby, identified with us in our humanity, walked with us, revealed the Father to us, suffered and died for us, rose again from the dead for us, and now reigns in heaven with the Father – and is coming again to bring the kingdom of God in all its fullness.

I have a really old book in my library. At least in human years it’s kind of an old book. It was published in 1896 and I would like you to raise your hand if you were alive in 1896. Yes, I see those hands. You may put them down now. It’s more than a lifetime ago. It’s written by

a man named Robert E. Speer who is beloved at Princeton Theological Seminary, and please don't hold that against him, because there were good reasons to love him. This man loved Jesus. He was the head of the Board of Foreign Missions for the Presbyterian Church for 30 years or so in the early part of the 20th century.

He was just a young man, 30 years old, when he wrote this book entitled *The Man, Christ Jesus*. In it, he quotes Napoleon Bonaparte. Two hundred years ago, Napoleon Bonaparte, the great military leader and emperor of France, made these comments about the person of Jesus Christ. He said, "Between Jesus and whoever else in the world there is no possible term of comparison. I know men, and Jesus Christ is no mere man. Superficial minds may see a resemblance between Jesus and the founders of empires and the gods of other religions, but that resemblance does not exist. There is between Him and all other religions whatsoever the distance of infinity."

I don't understand infinity, except that I know it's really, really, really a big distance. From the first day to the last, Jesus is always the same, majestic and simple, infinitely firm and infinitely gentle. Napoleon asked a friend to describe who Jesus was to him. The friend declined, and so Napoleon proceeded, "Well then, I'll tell you. Alexander the Great, Caesar, Charlemaine and I have all founded great empires, but on what did these creations of our genius depend? Upon force. Jesus alone founded His empire upon love. And to this day millions would die for Him. I think I understand something of human nature," Napoleon said, "and I tell you that all these were men, as I am a man. No one else is like Him. Jesus was more than a man. I've inspired multitudes with such a devotion that they would have died for me, but to do this it was necessary that I should be visibly present, with the electric influences of my looks, my words, my voice. When I saw men and spoke to them, I lit up the flames of self-devotion in their hearts. Jesus alone has succeeded in so raising the mind of man toward the unseen that it becomes insensible to barriers of time and space. Across a chasm of 1,800 years [now 2,000 years] Jesus Christ makes a demand which is above all others difficult to satisfy. He asks for that which a philosopher may often seek in vain at the hands of his friends, or the father of his children, or a bride of a spouse, or a man of his brother. He asks for the human heart. He will have it completely to Himself. In defiance of time and space the soul of man with all its powers becomes annexed to the empire of Christ. All who sincerely believe in Him experience that remarkable, supernatural love toward Him. Time, the great destroyer, is powerless to extinguish the sacred flame. It can neither exhaust its strength nor put a limit to its range. This is the thing that strikes me most and proves to me quite conclusively, the divinity of Jesus Christ. The hope of the world was disguised as a newborn baby lying in a manger."

Now you may know all the facts that I have mentioned tonight about Jesus and many, many more. You may know more facts about Jesus intellectually than I do. And it's good to know about Jesus. But it is essential to know *Him*, to know Him personally, experientially. Essential to know not only that He is the hope of the world, but to know in your heart and life the hope that is found in Him. It's important to know that He is the Savior, Christ the Lord. It's essential to know that He is your Savior and the Lord of your life. So, dear friends, please do not leave here this evening without meeting face-to-face with the Child of Bethlehem, who grew up to walk the road to Cavalry where He gave His life for you and me. Do not be

content to leave here tonight believing in your head that Jesus is the Light of the world but not experiencing the light of His grace and truth in your own heart through simply trusting in Him to be your Savior and giving your life to Him, committing your life to Him, in gratitude for the gift of His life for you.