

Well, good evening and Merry Christmas. If you don't know me, my name is Jack. I'm a regular attendee here at Northern Life Baptist Church.

It's so good to have you along, and I'm very privileged to be able to bring the message tonight. So let me pray and then we'll get into it. Heavenly Father, we thank you for this blessed time of Christmas.

We thank you for the opportunity to come together in this grand tradition and sing these songs together and celebrate the season, Lord. We just pray this time together would be meaningful and that you will bless it to us in the name of Jesus, amen.

So here we are once again. It is December. It is that busy, joyful, blessed time of year when we celebrate Christmas.

Perhaps the second most important event in the Christian calendar after Easter, maybe third if you count May mission month. But if you've been around long enough, you'll know to expect certain things from a Christmas sermon.

Put your hand up if you've ever heard of that phrase, the true meaning of Christmas. Yeah, it's a bit of a cliché nowadays in movies and in sermons and that sort of thing. Some of you will be expecting me to talk about the true meaning of Christmas.

If you're one of those people, you're right. I am going to talk about the true meaning of Christmas. But I think when we use that phrase, true meaning of Christmas, it sounds a little bit monolithic.

But if you think about it, meaning is a little bit more tricky than that. It's a bit of a fuzzy word. It involves implications and follow-ons.

Of course, the Christmas story itself has many moving parts, many elements. I guess what I'm suggesting to you, to borrow a metaphor, is that Christmas is like an onion. It has layers.

And so we're going to unpack some of those layers tonight. I thought it was helpful to look at three particular ones. The small picture, the medium picture, and then the big picture of Christmas.

I'm going to go through it, look at the story, look at the implications of each of these sort of frames of Christmas, and then we're going to sing some more carols. Sound like a plan? Wonderful.

Let's get into it then.

1 — THE SMALL PICTURE

Let's start with a small picture. Just looking within the Christmas story itself, I think what we immediately see straight off the bat is God's love for the lowly. His love for the lowly.

Let me read from the Gospel of Luke, from chapter two starting from verse four, which we had read earlier in the night.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him, and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.

She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. All right, so many of you will know this story as well.

Mary and Joseph, under orders of a Roman census, travel to Joseph's hometown of Bethlehem. Mary is heavily pregnant, and she starts to give birth. And it seems she's giving birth in the room where they keep the animals.

Now, the way travel worked in the ancient world is, you didn't usually go to a hotel or an inn. There were few and far between. You would usually go stay with someone you knew, whether it be a family member or a friend.

One of the terms they used at the time was a guest friend, right? You go and stay in their guest room. So most of these houses had a guest room.

But we're told that the guest room was full. So where are Mary and Joseph staying? Well, most of these houses had a lower floor where they would bring the animals in at night to keep them from being stolen.

And this is where Mary is giving birth. This is kind of the equivalent of being on the blowout mattress in the garage next to the parked car with the dog sleeping in the corner.

Well, pretty uncomfortable situation for a heavily pregnant woman, I might add. And of course, she gives birth in this environment. And we're told she has to place the baby in a manger.

Now, a manger is basically an animal feeding trough. So to stick with our garage analogy, this is like putting the baby in the dog's bowl. And from a medical and hygiene perspective, this is, I imagine, far from what you want.

But also from a social perspective, this is a profoundly embarrassing situation for Mary, who is almost certainly quite young, and she's become pregnant out of wedlock in a very conservative society.

What's more, she comes from a kind of a dodgy area. Nazareth had a bad reputation. The saying was is that can anything good come out of Nazareth?

So far from our typical neat picture of nativity, we have actually quite a dingy scene. And to add to this, the first people to whom this is revealed are shepherds.

Now, shepherding is the quintessentially humble profession in the ancient world, right? It means literally to be out in the fields looking after someone else's sheep because they're too wealthy or important to do it themselves.

And it was into all of this that God chose to be born. He chose to be born that way. Think about it.

He could have been born in a palace as the son of an emperor, but he preferred to do it this way because he loves the lowly.

And this is quite important to us because what this aspect of the story should do for us is shift our perspective and move our gaze.

Now we're pretty used to having our gaze drawn in our day, especially by people we admire, think of YouTubers, podcasters, celebrities. The very term influencer describes a person's ability to influence you, to move your gaze towards something.

How often have you been watching a piece of content when it be interrupted by, this episode is brought to you by NordBP and Squarespace, Raid Shadow Legends, the usual suspects.

The influencer draws our gaze to that particular brand, and that brand receives endorsement and recognition that otherwise wouldn't have had. And so when God chooses to be born lowly, he's drawing our gaze away from the powerful and onto the humble.

This is relevant to us because most of our images at Christmas time in Australia don't focus on the lowly. Most of the time, it's the happy family gathered around an abundant table with beautiful Christmas decorations, perfectly wrapped gifts.

And that's fine, nothing wrong with that. But perhaps we need to expand our perspective. This warm, fuzzy picture of Christmas can hide the people who are wondering if they can afford Christmas dinner this year.

It can hide the people who are crying because of broken relationships. It can hide the people who aren't sleeping in a regular bedroom this Christmas. I have no doubt some of you can fit into those categories.

But the good news is that that is where God wants to be at Christmas. In those ordinary, sometimes painful experiences, that is where God chose to be born. So allow your gaze to be moved to the lowly.

Let the Christmas story itself be a standing advertisement for all who are broken and ordinary and pained.

Think about how you can shift your perspective towards them in your conversations, in your prayers, in how you spend your time, in how you spend your money. Are there people doing it tough in your life? How can you focus on them?

That's what the small picture gives us, and it's very important.

2 — THE MEDIUM PICTURE

But let's zoom out now to the medium picture, to this person of Jesus, what his life was and what it meant to us.

And what became clear during his time on earth to those who followed him, and what became clear after his time on earth, is that Jesus came to redeem humanity. Let me read from a man named Paul, who was an early Christian writer.

This is from his letter to the Galatians. Galatia is an area in which there was a church. This is from chapter four, verse four.

But when the set time had fully come, God sent his son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under the law, that we might receive adoption to sonship.

Because you are his sons, God sent the spirit of his son into our hearts, the spirit who calls out, Abba, father. So you are no longer a slave, but God's child. And since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.

So what Paul is saying here is that at a certain point in history, which we would call the first Christmas, God sent his son to redeem humanity from under the law and make us his children. Now, two things just to note.

Firstly, note that it says God sent his son. He didn't create his son. He didn't birth his son.

He sent his son. This is a being that pre-existed his birth. This is one with God.

Second point is this idea of the law. What is this law that is mentioned? Well, if you're not familiar, the law is essentially a moral code.

It's found in the older Hebrew part of the Bible, which we call the Old Testament, and it governs the relationship between humans and God.

And for much of history, that relationship was characterized by our failure to live up to that moral code, and that failure which results in judgment and death for us.

But that is not the be-all and end-all of our relationship with God, because this little child in a manger would grow up to live a perfect life, fulfilling that moral code in spirit and in letter, and even going willingly to an unjust death.

And God recognized him as humanity's perfect representative, and raised him from the dead, so that now on, if you pledge your allegiance to Jesus, God will not see your sin, he will not see your failure or your brokenness, he will only see the

goodness of his son. And he will welcome you, not as the successful adherent of a moral code, but as a child adopted into his family. I think this dynamic is illustrated a bit in our modern experience of Christmas.

Those of us who are adults, know that Christmas time is not always a walk in the park.

You gotta plan the day, you gotta sort out your secret Santa, who did I give to last time, who am I giving to this year, which relatives are you gonna visit on, which days, when and where. What's your plans for Boxing Day?

You gotta buy the presents, gotta stay within the price limits, gotta wrap the presents, gotta think about food, who's bringing what, then you gotta cook the food, then you gotta think about your work Christmas party, remember to RSVP for that, oh,

and also bring your secret Santa this, and then you gotta pack your bags to go visit grandma on the coast and please let there be no traffic, and also make sure you do the washing up before you leave, oh, and remember to put the Christmas decorations

out. It's a busy, stressful, sometimes burdensome time of year, for adults. But for kids, most kids anyway, they don't have to worry about any of that. For kids, Christmas is a time of fun and games and excitement and presents.

And so when we become adopted as God's children, our new parent takes our burdens and gives us joy and love and his presence instead.

And so if you haven't given your allegiance to Jesus yet, I want to extend an invitation to this family, to God's family. A family where you are loved and accepted no matter what you have done.

And there are people in this church who would love to talk to you about Jesus. In fact, we've just printed a booklet which you can find out in the foyer that will tell you all about him. This invitation is to come, know Jesus, and be redeemed.

3 — THE BIG PICTURE

But Christmas is not just about the redemption of us as individuals. Because as we zoom out to the big picture, we see that Christmas is D-Day for the redemption of the whole world. It's renewal in fact.

Let me read from the last book of the Bible, the Book of Revelation in Chapter 21 from verse 3. And I heard a loud voice from the throne say, Look, God's dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them.

They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain for the old order of things has passed away.

He who is seated on the throne said, I am making everything new. Then he said, write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true.

So this passage is at the end of a vision given to a man named John about sort of God's perspective on the world. And this particular part describes God's return, the way he comforts his people, or the way he wipes the tears from their eyes.

And it also talks about the renewal of the world. Boy, does our world need renewal. As a nation, we are more conscious of that this week than perhaps ever before.

Despite our best efforts, the world is full of darkness and evil. The hatred of one group by another and vice versa, the injustice, the starvation, the growing conflagration of war.

All of these things are reminders to us of the brokenness of this world. But Christmas is a reminder to us that God has not forgotten us. He is not blind to the suffering of this world.

This baby Jesus born at Christmas came not just to redeem humanity, but to redeem all creation, to renew this world.

And he will return to this earth, not as a baby, but as a king at the right hand of God our Father, to sweep away the old order of things. Much like a bush fire, we're getting into that season now.

And bush fires can be very tragic for those caught in them. But from the perspective of an ecosystem, bush fires can actually be really important for renewal. The fire burns away the dead leaves and foliage on the forest floor.

It clears away the rotten debris, the ashes rejuvenate the soil, the clearing of the canopy allows the sun to reach the earth once more. And all of this creates the conditions for new life to emerge.

And so too will Jesus come again one day to clear away all the brokenness, all the evil, all the suffering, all the hatred, all the violence. And the world will be as it should be, as it was always meant to be. This is the Christian hope.

For those of us who believe, those of us who know Christ, our redemption is the first taste of that renewed world. In fact, we belong more to that world than we do to this one.

As Paul says, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come, the old is gone and the new is here. So let's act like it. Let us show the world what the new creation looks like.

Let's not match evil with evil and hatred with hatred. Those things belong to the old order. Instead, let's match evil with goodness and hatred with love.

Let us meet fear and panic with hope and patient endurance. If you look forward to that new renewed world, don't wait for it to arrive. Be part of it now.

Respond to evil with good.

As we wrap up now, and prepare to sing about that first Christmas, I want to ask you to reflect on how deeply a profound event it was, that through this woman of no particular significance and her child sitting in an animal feeding trough, God showed

not only His love for the lowly and the humble, but His love for us and His earnest desire to adopt us as His children. More than that, He showed His earnest desire to renew this world and fix its brokenness and make all things new.

In the small, medium and big pictures, God is calling us to Himself, to know Jesus, to love the lowly, and to meet evil with goodness. Let me pray to finish. Oh God, our Father, we thank you for your grace and your gift poured out to us at Christmas.

We thank you that you have not forgotten us, you have not forgotten our world, you have not even forgotten the lowly Lord. I pray that you would be moving in the hearts of this congregation and this nation to respond with goodness and love.

I pray that your kingdom would come. In Jesus' name, Amen.