

WHAT CHILD IS THIS?

MAY THE WORDS OUR MY MOUTH, THE MEDITATIONS OF MY HEART BE ALWAYS ACCEPTABLE IN THY SIGHT, OH LORD, MY STRENGTH, AND MY REDEEMER. AMEN

ADVENT IS THE SEASON IN WHICH WE PREPARE FOR THE COMING OF THE LORD. NOW WE ARE CELEBRATING HIS ARRIVAL THIS SUNDAY AND NEXT SUNDAY.. TODAY, WE'LL LOOK MORE CLOSELY AT HIS FIRST COMING IN THE CHILD OF BETHLEHEM. TO GET US STARTED, LET'S LISTEN TO THE WORDS OF THIS BELOVED CAROL:

*“WHAT CHILD IS THIS, WHO, LAID TO REST,
ON MARY'S LAP IS SLEEPING?
WHOM ANGELS GREET WITH ANTHEMS SWEET
WHILE SHEPHERDS WATCH ARE KEEPING?”*

WHAT CHILD IS THIS? THAT'S THE QUESTION: WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT THIS BABY BORN SO LONG AGO IN THE LITTLE VILLAGE OF BETHLEHEM? AND WHAT DIFFERENCE DOES IT MAKE TO US TODAY?

MARK'S GOSPEL SAYS NOTHING ABOUT JESUS' BIRTH. HE BEGINS WITH JESUS' BAPTISM IN THE RIVER JORDAN. BY THIS TIME, HE'S THIRTY YEARS OLD. THE BIRTH NARRATIVES ARE FOUND IN MATTHEW AND LUKE, BUT THEY TELL US LITTLE ABOUT THE CHILD HIMSELF. IF YOU WANT TO GET THE BIG PICTURE, THE BEST PLACE TO LOOK IS IN THE PROLOGUE TO THE GOSPEL OF JOHN. IT BEGINS,

“IN THE BEGINNING WAS THE WORD, AND THE WORD WAS WITH GOD, AND THE WORD WAS GOD.” (JOHN 1:1)

LONG BEFORE THE CHILD WE NOW KNOW AS JESUS OF NAZARETH CAME INTO THIS WORLD, HE LIVED IN PERFECT UNION WITH GOD. HE WAS WITH GOD; HE WAS GOD. AND THAT'S A MYSTERY WE CAN'T EXPLAIN, EXCEPT TO SAY THAT IT WAS THROUGH HIM THAT THE UNIVERSE, AS WE KNOW IT, WAS CREATED. JOHN WRITES: *"ALL THINGS CAME INTO BEING THROUGH HIM, AND WITHOUT HIM NOT ONE THING CAME INTO BEING."* (JOHN 1:3)

WHEN IT COMES TO THE BIRTH OF JESUS, IT'S PUTTING IT MILDLY TO SAY HE WAS NO ORDINARY CHILD. HE WAS UNIQUE AND UNLIKE ANY OTHER CHILD WHO CAME BEFORE HIM OR WHO HAS COME INTO THE WORLD SINCE. HE WAS – AND IS – ONE OF A KIND. THE NICENE CREED DESCRIBES JESUS THIS WAY: *"... (HE WAS) THE ONLY-BEGOTTEN SON OF GOD ... BEGOTTEN, NOT MADE, BEING OF ONE SUBSTANCE WITH THE FATHER ..."*

WHILE OTHER TEACHERS AND PROPHETS AND RELIGIOUS FIGURES STAND OUT IN HISTORY, ONLY JESUS IS DIVINE. HE WAS NONE OTHER THAN GOD INCARNATE.

DO YOU REMEMBER THE MOVIE, *OH, GOD!*, STARRING GEORGE BURNS AND JOHN DENVER? THE GIST OF THE MOVIE IS THAT GOD PICKS THIS UNLIKELY GROCERY STORE MANAGER AND TELLS HIM TO DELIVER A MESSAGE, THAT HE WANTS EVERYONE TO GET ALONG AND LIVE IN PEACE WITH ONE ANOTHER. SIMPLE AS THAT.

AT FIRST, THE STORE MANAGER DOESN'T BELIEVE IT'S REALLY GOD. AFTER ALL, GOD LOOKS LIKE, WELL, GEORGE BURNS. SO HE TESTS GOD IN A NUMBER WAYS AND, EVERY TIME, GOD PASSES THE TEST. NOW CONVINCED

THAT IT'S REALLY GOD WHO'S TALKING TO HIM, HE TAKES GOD'S MESSAGE BEFORE A BLUE RIBBON PANEL OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS. THEY'RE SKEPTICAL, OF COURSE, BUT, TO HUMOR HIM, THEY POSE A NUMBER OF QUESTIONS FOR GOD TO ANSWER – THINGS LIKE, "WHAT WERE YOU THINKING WHEN YOU MADE THE AARDVARK?" THEIR MOST POIGNANT QUESTION WAS THIS: "WAS JESUS *REALLY* YOUR SON?"

THE STORE MANAGER MEETS WITH GOD IN A HOTEL ROOM WITH THEIR LIST OF QUESTIONS. GOD ANSWERS EACH ONE CANDIDLY AND WITH A SENSE OF HUMOR. THEN COMES THE BIGGIE: "WAS JESUS *REALLY* YOUR SON?" GOD SMILES AND SAYS, "YES, OF COURSE, JESUS WAS MY SON ... AS WAS ABRAHAM AND MOSES AND DAVID AND MOHAMMED."

OF COURSE, WE RECOGNIZE THIS AS THE *GOSPEL ACCORDING TO HOLLYWOOD* AND NOT THE BIBLICAL WITNESS AT ALL. IT DOES *NOT* REPRESENT THE CHRISTIAN FAITH. TO GIVE THE SCREENWRITERS CREDIT, IT DOES HAVE A CERTAIN APPEAL. IT SOFTENS THE OFFENSE OF JESUS' DIVINITY AND PUTS HIM ON PAR WITH ALL THE OTHER RELIGIOUS FIGURES OF THE WORLD. BUT THE OFFENSE OF JESUS' DIVINITY IS WHAT WE BELIEVE AND WE SHOULD NOT COMPROMISE OUR FAITH.

OTHERS DON'T HAVE TO AGREE; BUT, FOR US THE BIBLE IS CLEAR: JESUS WAS NONE OTHER THAN GOD HIMSELF IN HUMAN FORM. HE WAS WITH GOD FROM THE VERY BEGINNING, AND IT WAS THROUGH HIM, AND HIM ALONE, THAT ALL CREATION CAME INTO BEING.

AND SO, WHEN WE ASK THE QUESTION, “WHAT CHILD IS THIS?” THE FIRST THING WE NEED TO KNOW IS THAT HE IS GOD. HE MAY HAVE COME AS ONE OF US, BUT HE IS DECIDEDLY DIFFERENT FROM ANY OF US.

THAT LEADS TO THE SECOND POINT: IN COMING INTO THE WORLD AS GOD IN HUMAN FORM, JESUS CAME TO SAVE US FROM OUR SINS, AND THAT CREATES A CERTAIN TENSION. JOHN PUT IT THIS WAY:

“HE WAS IN THE WORLD, AND THE WORLD CAME INTO BEING THROUGH HIM; YET THE WORLD KNEW HIM NOT. HE CAME TO HIS OWN PEOPLE, BUT HIS OWN PEOPLE RECEIVED HIM NOT.” (JOHN 1:10-11)

THIS IS A PART OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY WE DON'T LIKE TO HEAR. WE LIKE TO EMPHASIZE THE PART ABOUT THE SHEPHERDS LEAVING THEIR FLOCKS IN THE FIELDS AND COMING TO BETHLEHEM, *“TO SEE THIS THING WHICH IS COME TO PASS.” (LUKE 2:15)*

WE'D LIKE TO THINK THAT, IF WE'D BEEN THERE, WE WOULD HAVE, TOO ... THAT, LIKE THE MAGI FROM THE EAST, WE WOULD'VE BROUGHT GIFTS TO OFFER. AND, YOU CAN BE SURE, OURS WOULD'VE BEEN PRACTICAL GIFTS – A WARM BLANKET, FOOTIE PAJAMAS, A BOX OF PAMPERS. WHAT'S A CHILD GOING TO DO WITH GOLD, FRANKINCENSE AND MYRRH, ANYWAY?

YET, LOOK WHAT HAPPENED: JESUS GREW UP IN THE LITTLE VILLAGE OF NAZARETH AND, WHEN THE TIME WAS RIPE, HE DECLARED HIMSELF, SAYING, *“THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME, BECAUSE HE HAS ANOINTED ME TO BRING GOOD NEWS TO THE POOR. HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND, TO LET THE*

OPPRESSED GO FREE, TO PROCLAIM THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOR." (LUKE 4:18-19)

HE WENT ON TO SAY THAT THIS PROPHECY OF ISAIAH HAD NOW BEEN FULFILLED IN THEIR HEARING – THE IMPLICATION BEING THAT HE WAS THE MESSIAH. THE ELDERS OF HIS SYNAGOGUE WERE JUST AS CLEAR: OH, NO, YOU'RE NOT. *"IS THIS NOT THE CARPENTER'S SON?"* THEY ASKED. THEY DRAGGED HIM TO THE EDGE OF TOWN WITH EVERY INTENTION OF STONING HIM TO DEATH. (LUKE 4:18-29)

THAT WAS JUST THE BEGINNING. THE MORE HE HEALED THE SICK AND SHARED THE GOOD NEWS OF GOD'S LOVE, THE MORE THE JEWISH LEADERS PLOTTED AGAINST HIM. THEY CRITICIZED HIM FOR EATING WITH TAX COLLECTORS AND SINNERS (MK. 2:16); THEY ACCUSED HIM OF BEING POSSESSED BY A DEMON (MK. 3:21); AND WHEN HE HEALED A MAN'S WITHERED HAND ON THE SABBATH, MARK SAYS,

"THE PHARISEES WENT OUT AND IMMEDIATELY CONSPIRED WITH THE HERODIANS AGAINST HIM, HOW TO DESTROY HIM. (MARK 3:6)

IT'S AN AGE-OLD QUESTION: IF JESUS CAME UP TO YOU TODAY, WOULD YOU RECOGNIZE HIM AS YOUR LORD AND SAVIOR? AS IMPORTANTLY, WOULD HE RECOGNIZE YOU AS ONE OF HIS DEVOTED FOLLOWERS? IN ONE OF THE MOST HAUNTING PASSAGES OF THE NEW TESTAMENT, JESUS SAID,

"NOT EVERYONE WHO SAYS TO ME, 'LORD, LORD,' WILL ENTER THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN, BUT ONLY HE WHO DOES THE WILL OF MY FATHER WHO IS IN HEAVEN. MANY WILL SAY TO ME ON THAT DAY, 'LORD, LORD, DID WE NOT

PROPHECY IN YOUR NAME, AND IN YOUR NAME DRIVE OUT DEMONS AND PERFORM MANY MIRACLES?’ THEN I WILL TELL THEM PLAINLY, ‘I NEVER KNEW YOU. DEPART FROM ME, YOU EVILDOERS!’” (MATTHEW 7:21-23)

THE HEART OF THE CHRISTMAS MESSAGE IS THAT JESUS CAME INTO THE WORLD TO SET US FREE FROM OUR SINS. AND, WHILE I HATE TO THROW COLD WATER ON OUR WARM CHRISTMAS GLOW, THERE’S NO GETTING AROUND IT: TO BE SET FREE FROM OUR SINS IS FOR US TO TURN FROM OUR SINFUL WAYS.

FORGIVENESS AND REPENTANCE GO HAND IN HAND. THE DEGREE TO WHICH YOU’RE WILLING TO GIVE UP YOUR SELFISHNESS AND GREED IS THE DEGREE TO WHICH YOU’RE LIKELY TO EXPERIENCE THE DEPTH OF GOD’S AMAZING GRACE AND LOVE. THE MORE YOU KNOW YOUR UNWORTHINESS TO KNEEL BEFORE THE CHRIST-CHILD, THE MORE YOU’RE ABLE TO SING, *“JOY TO THE WORLD, THE LORD IS COME.”*

WHAT CHILD IS THIS? HE’S GOD ALMIGHTY. HE’S THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD. HE’S THE HOPE OF OUR SALVATION. JOHN WRITES, *“BUT TO ALL WHO RECEIVED HIM, WHO BELIEVED IN HIS NAME, HE GAVE POWER TO BECOME CHILDREN OF GOD, WHO WERE BORN, NOT OF BLOOD OR OF THE WILL OF THE FLESH OR OF THE WILL OF MAN, BUT OF GOD.” (JOHN 1:12-13)*

WHAT WE ALWAYS NEED TO BE CLEAR ABOUT IS THIS: SALVATION IS *BOTH* AN ACCOMPLISHED FACT *AND* A PROCESS OF BECOMING. ON THE ONE HAND, CHRIST DIED, ONCE AND FOR ALL, TO ESTABLISH A NEW COVENANT. THE

FOCUS IS NOT ON THE INDIVIDUAL, BUT ON THE WORLD AND GOD'S DETERMINATION TO RECONCILE THE WORLD TO HIMSELF. IN JESUS CHRIST A NEW CREATION HAS BEGUN: *"AS IN ADAM ALL DIE, SO ALSO IN CHRIST SHALL ALL BE MADE ALIVE."* (1 COR. 15:22)

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO SAY THAT YOU WERE SAVED BY JESUS' DEATH ON THE CROSS IF YOU'RE NOT WILLING TO EMBRACE HIM AND FOLLOW HIM AS THE LORD OF YOUR LIFE? INNER PEACE AND LASTING JOY COME ONLY AS YOU SURRENDER YOUR WILL TO HIM ... NOT ONCE, BUT DAY BY DAY; AND NOT BY WORDS ALONE, BUT AS YOU TAKE UP YOUR CROSS AND WALK IN HIS FOOTSTEPS.

SALVATION IS *BOTH* AN ACCOMPLISHED FACT AND A PROCESS OF BECOMING. NO ONE KNEW THIS BETTER THAN THE APOSTLE PAUL WHO, AFTER ALL HE'D GONE THROUGH, TOLD THE PHILIPPIANS,

"I WANT TO KNOW CHRIST AND THE POWER OF HIS RESURRECTION ... NOT THAT I HAVE ALREADY OBTAINED THIS OR HAVE ALREADY REACHED THE GOAL; BUT I PRESS ON TO MAKE IT MY OWN, (AND SO)... FORGETTING WHAT LIES BEHIND AND STRAINING FORWARD TO WHAT LIES AHEAD, I PRESS ON TOWARD THE GOAL FOR THE PRIZE OF THE HEAVENLY CALL OF GOD IN CHRIST JESUS. LET THOSE OF US WHO ARE MATURE BE LIKE-MINDED."
(PHILIPPIANS 3:10-15)

WHAT CHILD IS THIS? HE'S GOD ALMIGHTY. HE'S THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD. HE'S THE HOPE OF OUR SALVATION. AND THIS IS THE GOOD NEWS:

"THE WORD BECAME FLESH AND DWELT AMONG US. WE HAVE BEHELD HIS GLORY ... AND WE HAVE ALL RECEIVED, GRACE UPON GRACE."(JOHN 1:14-16)

GOD SENT HIS ONLY BEGOTTEN SON INTO OUR COLD, DARK WORLD TO REDEEM US AND RECONCILE US TO HIMSELF. THE CHRISTMAS STORY IS A WAKEUP CALL, AND IT GOES LIKE THIS:

*WHY LIES HE IN SUCH MEAN ESTATE,
WHERE OX AND ASS ARE FEEDING?
GOOD CHRISTIANS, FEAR, FOR SINNERS HERE
THE SILENT WORD IS PLEADING.
NAILS, SPEAR SHALL PIERCE HIM THROUGH,
THE CROSS BE BORNE FOR ME, FOR YOU.
HAIL, HAIL THE WORD MADE FLESH,
THE BABE, THE SON OF MARY.*

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, AND OF THE SON, AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT.

AMEN.