

Christmas 2023

Pastor James Foley – Shared on Sunday, December 24, 2023

INTRODUCTION

Thank you for joining us for our Christmas Service. I wish you a very Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year! Whether you are here in person or joining online, you are most welcome. As we segue in our Christmas service, let us note the following:

1) Annual B. Meeting

The 2023 ABM will take place on Sunday, January 21, 2024, following service (January 28 in case of poor weather). The deadline for the submission of Ministry Leader Reports is Sunday, December 31, 2023. Lastly, a slate of candidates qualified to stand for election for the Board Office of Deacon has been posted in the Fellowship Hall. If your name appears on said list, please notify the Pastor of your intentions by Sunday, January 7, 2024, and only after prayerful consideration.

2) Piano Solo

At this time I would love to invite young Avery Phelps to share a Christmas song with us (i.e., round of applause).

POST 1 – Thank you for sharing your gift, Avery! At this time the nursery-aged children and workers are dismissed.

POST 2 – Children's Church will remain with us this AM. Should your child find it difficult to enjoy my message, the downstairs Community Room is available (i.e., feel free to listen and participate via the livestream broadcast). However, I believe that children are able to give the Lord and this servant the best of their time and attention.

KEY – Please have a Bible at the ready and be ready to take notes as you desire. We have much to cover today:

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SETTING THE STAGE

Merry Christmas (once again) to you and yours. May the Lord bless us as we gather to consider His Holy Word!

FYI 1 – If I may be transparent for a moment, Christmas Sunday is a particularly challenging Sunday for ministers.

Q. Why is this the case ?

A1. A great many feel a heightened sense of responsibility to adequately convey that most timeless of messages. It is quite a sobering thing to realize that the God of the universe has called you to herald the Birth of His Son. In such moments I am reminded of the caution of the Book of James (3:1, NIV): “Not many of you should become teachers, my fellow believers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.” No pressure

A2. Similarly, we feel a heightened responsibility to maximize the limited window of opportunity we are given. You see, Christmas—along with Easter—is one of the few times a year some people choose to attend church. With such being the case, I may only have one hour per year to convey the news of Jesus’ Birth and Resurrection. Should you fit into such a category, please know that it is our joy to have you with us. We do enjoy your presence!

A3. Most commonly, preaching a Christmas message is difficult because we are aware of an abiding reality: the vast majority of attendees are exceedingly familiar with the Christmas Story and the Birth of Jesus Christ. Though each year we endeavor to find a unique or creative point of access whereby we might consider His Birth, most men, women and children do not leave such a gathering learning anything “new” (i.e., intellectual sense).

FYI 2 – I realize there is precious little that I can convey today in terms of content that you have not heard before.

KEY 1 – Thus said, perhaps my task this holiday season is not to offer yet another retelling of the Christmas Story.

KEY 2 – Perhaps it is to question what you and I are doing, what lives we are leading, in light of such knowledge.

KEY 3 – I have long affirmed that the widest gap is between what we know and what we apply. Head vs. Heart!

ALLOW ME TO ELABORATE...

MARY

To begin, I am quite certain that you are aware of the story of Mary. Those who are aware will remember that:

Luke 1:26B–38 (NIV)

26 . . . God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, 27 to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you."

29 Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"

35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. 36 Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. 37 For no word from God will ever fail."

38 "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her.

NOTE 1 – Those of you who have attended in years past will know that Mary serves as a truly inspirational figure:

1) Mary as a Woman of Humility

Please note the manner in which Mary viewed herself (v. 38, Emphasis Mine): "I am the Lord's **servant** [f. slave]." This young woman recognized that her connection with God was not a relationship among equals. Rather, there was a hierarchy and structure in which the Lord was at the top, with her being in a subordinate, servile position. Her willingness to humble herself before God led to the Birth of Christ and the salvation of wayward humanity.

2) Mary as a Woman of Faith

When an angel of the Lord appeared to Zechariah in the earlier segments of Luke 1 (re: the birth of John T.B.), this aged priest doubted in a spirit of disbelief. Yet, when news came to Mary that she would be with Child in the most miraculous of ways, she simply took the Lord at His word! No argument; no debate; no disbelief; and no rejection of the message or overthinking of the matter. Just faith (v. 38): "May your word to me be fulfilled."

3) Mary as a Woman of Sacrifice

It must be noted that the faith and humility of Mary would come at great personal cost. When Mary said "YES" to the call of God, she was saying "YES" to a lifetime of shunning, gossip, ridicule, scorn, loss of friends, loss of credibility, potential loss of her betrothed and future husband, Joseph, and beyond. She was saying "YES" to many lonely months of pregnancy, and a lifetime of whispers. Yet she was willing to trust God in the short term, believing for eventual vindication and elevation! Consider the words she sang in a latter portion of this chapter:

Luke 1:46b–49 (Emphasis Mine)

46 . . . Mary said:

“My soul glorifies the Lord

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has been mindful

of the humble state of his servant.

From now on all generations will call me blessed,

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me—
holy is his name.”

KEY – You and I may know this. We may be able to even teach this!

Q. Yet what are we doing with such knowledge? How has it found genuine, real application?

NOTE 2 – It is a lovely thing to speak of Mary and her virtue(s). It is quite another to commit to such an example!

Q1. To what degree do you recognize yourself as the servant of the Lord?

Q2. How has that commitment to serve God practically manifested in living?

Q3. How has your willingness to serve led you to serve OTHERS in your sphere?

Q1. To what degree is your life characterized by faith?

Q2. Have you trusted in Christ for salvation (i.e., personally)?

Q3. What are you actively trusting Him for in life and living today?

Q1. To what degree are you willing to embrace hardship?

Q2. How have you navigated the scorn and adversity in the Lord?

Q3. Are you more enamored with earthly reward or heavenly hope?

NOTE 3 – These are by no means easy questions to consider, but biblical Christianity has never been about ease.

JOSEPH

I am sure that you are also quite aware of the biblical figure of Joseph. Those who are aware will remember that:

Matthew 1:18b–25

18 . . . Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus [i.e., the Lord Saves], because he will save his people from their sins.”

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 “The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” (which means “God with us”) [cf. Isa. 7:14]. 24 When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. 25 But he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.

NOTE 1 – Those who have attended in years past will know that Joseph also serves as an inspirational example:

1) Joseph as a Man of Compassionate Character

How did Joseph respond to the unexpected news of this pregnancy? Note (v. 19, Emphasis Mine): “Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, **and yet did not want to expose her to public disgrace**, he had in mind to divorce her **quietly**.” He could have destroyed her reputation and her chance of knowing a happy life, if he chose to operate out of bitterness, spite and malice. Yet there was an admirable sense of love and restraint!

2) Joseph as a Man of Dutiful Obedience

Q. What was the response of Joseph to the call of God (i.e., which came via an angel in the midst of a dream)?

Matthew 1:20–21, 24, 25b (Emphasis Mine):

“20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.’ 24 When Joseph woke up, **he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him** and took Mary home as his wife. . . . 25 . . . **And he gave him the name Jesus.**”

3) Joseph Also Was Willing to Sacrifice and Practice Self-Denial

We noted that cost that Mary must have known in her community (e.g., gossip, scorn, loss of credibility, etc.). Do you not think Joseph faced the same things? Such cost in following the call of God! Moreover, note the restraint of Joseph once again in v. 25: “. . . he did not consummate their marriage until she gave birth to a son.” Joseph chose to deny his natural and marital impulses, lest the supernatural work of God be attributed to man!

KEY – You and I may know this. We may be able to even teach this!

Q. Yet what are we doing with such knowledge? How has it found genuine, real application?

NOTE 2 – It is a lovely thing to speak of Joseph and his virtue(s). It is quite another to commit to such an example!

Q1. To what degree is your life marked by compassion and character?

Q2. How do you react when you are slighted, wronged or seemingly treated poorly?

Q3. Do you find that you react with petty vengeance, bitterness, anger, etc., or like godly Joseph?

Q1. To what degree is your life marked by obedience?

Q2. What areas of your life are under His dominion? Where are you yielded?

Q3. What areas of your life are in rebellion or amiss? Are such being mortified or wrongly justified?

Q1. To what degree have you practiced self-control and denial if and when necessary?

Q2. Is your priority bringing glory to the Lord or fulfilling earthly desires (i.e., even good ones)?

Q3. How do you reach when the call of God calls you to lay aside even good things for long-term gain?

NOTE 3 – These are by no means easy questions to consider, but biblical Christianity has never been about ease!

SHEPHERDS

I am sure you also know of the shepherds of the field. I am sure that you know what transpired after Jesus' Birth:

Luke 2:8–18

8 . . . [i.e., that] there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them.

NOTE 1 – Those who have attended in years past will know that these men also serve as inspirational examples:

1) Shepherds as Figures of Hunger

We see in these shepherds a hunger to encounter the Savior they had heard of. They were not content to simply hear the angelic heraldry, but wanted to "GO" and "SEE" for themselves. Once again (v. 15, Emphasis Mine): "When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let's **go** to Bethlehem and **see** this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.'" Manifestation of "desire"!

2) Shepherds as Evangelistic Figures

Moreover, we see in this text that these simple shepherds were among the first evangelists both of and for Christ:

Luke 2:17 (Emphasis Mine)

17 When they had seen him, **they spread the word** concerning what had been told them about this child,

KEY – You and I may know this. We may be able to even teach this!

Q. Yet what are we doing with such knowledge? How has it found genuine, real application?

NOTE 2 – It is a lovely thing to speak of the shepherds or their virtues. It is another to commit to such an example!

- Q1. To what degree are you hungry for the presence of the Lord?
 Q2. To what degree are you content to simply hear about Him v. pursue Him?
 Q3. How has this hunger—or lack thereof—practically manifested amidst life and living?

- Q1. To what degree do you possess a hunger to make Him known to anyone and everyone?
 Q2. Who was the last person you shared your faith with, invited to church or won to the Lord?
 Q3. What step are you taking to become a more effective witness for Christ in this ruined world?

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JESUS CHRIST

Finally, I know that you are aware of the One who serves as the centerpiece of the Christmas Story: Jesus Christ:

NOTE 1 – I am sure you know much of what Scripture has to say re: His nature and work (Birth Announcements):

Luke 1:30b–33 (Mary) (Emphasis Mine)

30 . . . the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. 31 You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the **Son of the Most High**. The Lord God will give him the **throne of his father David**, 33 and he will **reign** over Jacob’s descendants **forever**; his **kingdom** will **never end**.”

Matthew 1:20–21 (Joseph) (Emphasis Mine)

20 But after he had considered this [i.e., quiet divorce], an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is **from the Holy Spirit**. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, **because he will save his people from their sins**.”

Luke 2:10–11 (Shepherds) (Emphasis Mine)

10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a **Savior** has been born to you; he is the **Messiah**, the **Lord**.”

NOTE 2 – I am sure you know much of what Scripture has to say re: His nature and work (i.e., beloved passages):

Isaiah 9:6–7a (Emphasis Mine)

6 For to us a child is born,
 to us a son is given,
 and the **government** will be on his shoulders.

And he will be called

**Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
 Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**

7 Of the greatness of his government and peace
 there will be no end.

He will **reign** on **David’s throne**
 and over his **kingdom**,
 establishing and upholding it
 with justice and righteousness
 from that time on and **forever**.

KEY – You and I may know this. We may be able to even teach this!

Q. Yet what are we doing with such knowledge? How has it found genuine, real application?

NOTE 3 – It is a lovely thing to know about Christ (i.e., His nature and work). It is another to know Him in reality!

Q1. To what degree are you moved by the divine nature of Christ (i.e., deity)?

Q2. To what degree does His reign extend over your life? Anticipation of His rule?

Q3. To what degree is He your Wonderful Counselor (i.e., primary source of insight)?

Q4. In what way do you understand Christ as the Head of a new race of the redeemed?

Q5. To what degree do you know both peace WITH God AND the enduring peace OF God?

Q6. Have you experienced “deliverance” from the penalty of sin through belief upon Christ?

Q7. Are you walking in “victory” over the influence of sin and becoming fruitful through faith?

NOTE 4 – These are by no means easy questions to consider, but biblical Christianity has never been about ease!

SUMMATIONS

Q. What are we to do in light of such a Christmas sermon?

NOTE 1 – To begin, I do not want you leaving this place feeling condemned (i.e., as if you do not measure up). Such sentiments are paralyzing agents that do not produce within us the transformation we need and desire. The goal is not perfection, for we shall never “arrive” (cf. Phil. 3:12), but genuine, earnest and real commitment.

NOTE 2 – The days of playing church are over for this nation, and the hour may be later than we often believe. God is looking to raise up men, women and children who are serious about Him, His ways and their walk w. Him! I am here to tell you that a Christmas Story that is heard but unheeded or assented to only will not avail you. Rather, its truths must be believed upon, that its power might manifest and through us (i.e., and unto the world)!

NOTE 3 – For me, I do not want to know about the Christmas Story only—I want to know its power in 2023, etc.

Q. What about you?

Q1. (Christian): What is the status of your relationship w. Christ? Where are you as 2023 ends and 2024 begins?

Q2. (Lost/Wayward): Do you know Jesus? Have you committed your life to Him in faith? Is He Savior and Lord?

CONCLUSION

NOTE 1 – Feel free to give either in person or online at www.NewLifeBarre.org.

NOTE 2 – Check out our website for any of our beyond Sunday ministries (MM, WM & CYC).

Numbers 6:24–26

24 The Lord bless you and keep you;

25 the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you;

26 the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.