

Something Worth Talking About

Luke 2:8-20

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The first thing the shepherds did after leaving the baby Jesus was to spread the word. They had to tell other people what they had heard about this baby, and everybody who heard it was amazed. Those shepherds—working class guys with no education—were the first evangelists. They are models for us in this season. We, too, ought to tell everyone we can about Jesus and why he came.

But for most of us the sentiment on the inside of our Christmas card is the full extent of our testimony during this season. Why is that? You could say that the birth of the baby is not news any more. Not many are amazed by the story. You *could* say that, but there are people right here on Block Island who do not know much of anything about who Jesus is. Many of our children are being raised by parents who themselves never absorbed the stories of Jesus. You might think that the market for Jesus is already saturated, but that would only demonstrate that you are hanging out with church people too much. There is a market out there, and it is not far away.

There are a few of you who find it as natural as the shepherds to tell people about Jesus. But I hear from many of you that you are uncomfortable talking to someone about Jesus. You don't think you know enough. You are afraid of being asked a question you can't answer. You don't want to offend anyone. You are shy. I think there is another reason we don't talk about Jesus: for many of us, it doesn't seem like anything worth talking about.

A few years ago I read a book by a discontented evangelical pastor in Minneapolis named Doug Pagitt, called *A Christianity Worth Believing*. Our problem in evangelism is not finding the nerve to talk about what we believe; the problem is finding a Christianity that is really worth believing. Most people in churches believe such a watered-down version of Christianity that it makes no difference in the world. Except for the fact that it gets you a ticket to heaven, it changes nothing. It's strictly a private matter. It gives you inner peace and hope for life after death. If that's all there is to Christianity, I wouldn't believe in it either—and I certainly wouldn't tell other people about it.

There's a new book out by N. T. Wright, the Anglican scholar and former bishop who is probably the best-known New Testament scholar in the world. (I love that a New Testament scholar is named "N. T.," although his friends call him "Tom.") His latest book—and he puts out a couple every year—is called *How God Became King: Getting to the Heart of the Gospels* [English title]. Wright is a very conservative guy in the academic world, but what he is saying is that for centuries we have been missing or ignoring the main point of the four gospels. Early on, the church settled on creeds that had to do with controversies in the first few centuries—about Jesus' divinity, his humanity, the Trinity, etc. The creeds are like the clothesline of the church: all the dirty laundry that had to get cleaned up is hung out there. Church fathers had to address areas that in a world dominated by Greek philosophy got messed up. But what you wind up with is creeds that say that Jesus was born, he died, and he was resurrected and reigns (although they imply he reigns in heaven and not here). If that's our faith, then Jesus' life and miracles and teaching don't seem to matter. Which makes you wonder why we even have the four gospels.

Since the Reformation at least, many people have read the gospels through the lens of Paul's teaching of salvation by grace through faith. So we read the stories just looking for evidence that Jesus is all about forgiving our sin and getting us to heaven. In the same way, some read the gospels through the lens of the Enlightenment, looking for evidence that Jesus is divine in order to prove the point with

skeptics—and we get the impression that Jesus’ divinity is the main point of the gospels. But if you read the gospels, you see that it clearly is not.

N. T. Wright argues that the main point of all four gospels is that God became King—that God brought in his kingly rule in Israel and in the whole world—through the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The first three gospels are clearly focused on Jesus’ announcement of the kingdom and his explanation of it, and Jesus’ royal status as Messiah is equally important in John’s gospel. What the gospels are primarily about is the very thing we prayed about in the Lord’s Prayer: Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth.

If you pay attention to the words of many Christmas carols, you will hear language about God’s kingdom coming through the Messiah. Think of the one that Martin sang for us earlier:

*Joy to the world, the Lord is come!
Let earth receive her King;
Let every heart prepare Him room,
And Heaven and nature sing.
Joy to the World, the Savior reigns!
Let men their songs employ;
While fields and floods, rocks, hills and plains
Repeat the sounding joy.
No more let sins and sorrows grow,
Nor thorns infest the ground;
He comes to make His blessings flow
Far as the curse is found.
He rules the world with truth and grace,
And makes the nations prove
The glories of His righteousness,
And wonders of His love. [Isaac Watts]*

That whole song, based on Psalm 98, understands Jesus as the Messiah and the King of the world. For Isaac Watts, Jesus’ coming was not just about our personal salvation but about the salvation of the whole world—the restoration of God’s rightful place as ruler, which makes the whole creation rejoice and undoes the damage that sin has done to the world.

One writer [James R. Rogers in his review of Wright’s book in *First Things*, August 14, 2012] told about visiting a large Christian school where a friend’s children were in the choir. The choir was rehearsing “Joy to the World,” but at the end of the rehearsal the choir director felt compelled to explain to the students that the song doesn’t actually apply today. “It’s a hymn about the millennium,” she said. “Jesus is going to reign some day, but he doesn’t reign today.”

You see, this is exactly the problem. A common view among evangelicals—and many others—is that all the talk about the kingdom is something that will not happen until the end of history when Jesus returns. In their view, his first visit was basically a bust as far as changing the world goes. He announced the kingdom but didn’t make it happen. All he succeeded in doing was living a perfect life so he could be a perfect sacrifice. But everything Jesus said about the kingdom—well, in the end, he had to say “Never mind. I guess I was wrong about it being in your midst or being right here at hand. I don’t even know *when* it will come.”

If you *only* take your faith from the creeds or from parts of Paul’s letters, and ignore the gospels, you can get that kind of Christianity. It’s a pretty convenient form if you want to say that for the time being Christians have to go along with the government and the culture. I guess it works as an explanation for why bad things happen to little children because it assumes that the devil is still in

control of this world. The problem is: this is not the faith we find in the four gospels. It is not the faith of the early church which held the creeds and the gospels together as guides to the whole truth.

If we understand that Jesus came to reign, his reign changes everything—nature, nations, everything—just as the song says. The joy of Christmas is the joy of a promise that began to be fulfilled when Jesus was born. The reason the baby is a big deal is that this is the beginning of his reign, which will bring peace and blessing and righteousness and transformation. Now *that's* something worth talking about.

Let's turn back to Luke 2 and those shepherds who were so eager to talk about Jesus. The news that they had was nothing private or subjective or trivial. The news they were given by the angels was about the coming of a kingdom. The news was public and world-changing.

If the angel had announced the good news the way we do, he would have said to the shepherds, "Good news—when you die you don't have to go to hell. You can go to heaven if you believe in this baby who is born today." But that's *not* what the angel said. The angel says that he has good news of great joy for all the people, for the whole world.

Here's the news: a *king* is born today—not in some distant future, but today. He is Savior and Lord. Those were not terms of private devotion. Those were titles used by Caesar Augustus for himself. In the real world, there already was a Savior. There already was a Lord. The Romans could make you pledge allegiance to him. But now a poor Jew is going to displace Caesar and he will be a Jewish king—born in David's hometown, as expected, because he will sit on David's throne. This king is given the title Messiah, the anointed one, the one designated by God to rule.

The good news is that this one born among the poor will be a new kind of king—different from Augustus and Quirinius who begin the chapter. There is no hint here that the idea of a king is metaphorical or that Jesus is supposed to reign only in your head or heart. This is the Messiah, "and the government will be upon his shoulder." What we learn in the course of the gospels is that the kingdom starts small, that it grows secretly, that it is not like the kingdom of human rulers, that it comes by means of healings and exorcisms and teaching and inclusion and loving and ultimately by means of suffering and dying and being raised to life by God. But the gospel that the shepherds hear is that God has returned in the form of a baby to reign over this world.

Then suddenly an angel army appears in the sky, singing—or just talking, if you go along with Pope Benedict's new book. It sounds like poetry to me, so I can't help but hear them singing. Besides, I've heard Handel's Messiah too many times. They sing about the effect this birth has on two levels. In the highest heavens, glory is being given to God for his mighty work in sending the Messiah. Down here on earth, there is *peace*. The prophets spoke of the peace that would come in the last days, when swords would be turned into ploughs. In Hebrew the word would be *shalom*—not just the end of war but the arrival of wholeness, the good life, "the way it spoze to be." In heaven, glory, and on earth, shalom among people who have received God's blessing.

The angels leave and the shepherds say, "Let's see for ourselves." Of course they want to see if it's all true, because if it's true it changes everything. They are pretty sure that it was the Lord who revealed this to them, but there was a sign involved—a way to know for sure. The angel offered proof. "You'll find a baby all wrapped up and lying in a feed-trough"—not an everyday sight. So the shepherds went to town and somehow they found the right house. Maybe they asked "Do you have any guests staying with the animals?" Sure enough, they found a baby lying in a feed-trough. So it was true. There was a new king and a new kingdom.

Would you keep it to yourself? On the night that the president was elected, did you keep it to yourself? Whether you thought it was good or bad, you knew it would change things. But an election is nothing compared to the change that came with the arrival of Messiah's kingdom.

The shepherds did not just tell people they had seen angels. That was not the big news. They told people what they had been told about the child: that this baby was the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. He would change the way the world is. He would change the course of history. And he would change the way we live.

In a rough neighborhood of Durham, North Carolina, a group of Christians have a monastic community trying to live out the gospel in the real world. A young Baptist minister named Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove is part of that group, and he tells about trying to develop conversations with the guys who hang out on the street corner [<http://www.booksandculture.com/articles/webexclusives/2012/august/how-god-became-king.html>]. One of the guys said to him, “Oh, you’re a preacher! You want to talk theology, right? Well, I’m a Muslim because Christianity is about what you believe in your heart, but Islam is about how you live.” In the neighborhood, they say most of the churches are selling “crack religion” that makes you feel good. They have the impression that Christianity is about believing what the creeds say about who Jesus is, but it makes no difference in how you live.

This Christmas, let’s go back and read the gospels. Let’s remember that the story of Jesus’ birth matters because it was the beginning of a revolution. It was the coming of the one who was to reign. And this Jesus’ kingdom becomes real in how we live, not just in how we believe. His kingdom is about changing the world. And that is something worth talking about. That is something to shout from the mountaintops.