

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Dave Smith

Sermon manuscript

SERMON SERIES: Rushing to Christmas!

(Jesus themes)

The Uglies of Christmas

(Luke 1 and 2)

Study #3

Introduction: Marketing 101...

I made a delightful discovery on Wednesday morning of this week. After a quick Google search, I found that *The Wittenburg Door*, a favorite magazine of my youth, is alive and well - on the Internet!

I used to describe *The Door* as Christianity's answer to *Mad Magazine*. Today, I might better describe it as Christianity's answer to *The Onion*.

The Door is now and always has been a bit wacky, majoring in satire.

As an illustration of its wackiness, *The Door* once named Steve Martin "Theologian of the Year." Each month, the writers would roast someone in the Christian community with a "Loser of the Month" award. At the same time, each edition would also include an editorial that forced serious reflection. (And, no, I'm not necessarily recommending it).

Anyway, many years ago *The Wittenburg Door* ran an article that was purported to have been written by a first century marketing firm addressed to Jesus about how to run a successful "Messiahship Campaign."

This firm encouraged Him to get rid of His current crop of disciples. Peter - too impetuous; Thomas - too shy; James and John - too boisterous; Judas Iscariot had promise, though... (you get the idea)

Jesus was urged to move his campaign headquarters from Capernaum to Jerusalem, to hob-nob with Sadducees and Pharisees, and to perform His miracles in populated areas where more people could see Him at work.

Remembering that article this past week got me thinking. What counsel would a marketing firm have offered God prior to Jesus' birth?

How might the birth of Jesus, the Son of God and the Savior of the world, best be orchestrated for maximum impact?

While I'm not sure what advice a marketing consultant might counsel in this regard, I do have a suspicion that the consultant would NOT recommend any of what actually happened on the first Christmas.

As we will see this morning, the story of the birth of Jesus, the most glorious birth ever, is filled with uglies.

Now, there is a birth story found in the early chapters of Luke's Gospel that is beautiful and inspiring, start to finish. But it is not the story of the birth of Jesus. It is the story of the birth of John the Baptist.

The Lovely Story of the Birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1:5-25, 57-80)

OLD Zacharias and Elizabeth

That story revolves around an elderly couple - a priest named Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth - who had longed to have children for their entire married life. Sadly, they were childless.

So, just how elderly were they?

For years I envisioned Zacharias being what we would call today a "senior citizen." Certainly active, not feeble. But well into his sixties, maybe his seventies or beyond. Then I got to thinking...

Luke tells us that Zacharias was an active priest. And Moses made it clear that a man could work as an active priest ONLY until he was fifty. After that he had to retire, priestly work being quite strenuous.¹

¹ See Numbers 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47; 8:25

This means that Zacharias, this OLD MAN, “*advanced in years,*” was in his FORTIES. Personally, I find that depressing...

At any rate, this elderly couple desperately longed for children. They were childless. And then, one eventful day, everything changed.

Good News in the Temple! (1:8-25)

Zacharias was performing his regular priestly duties. On a rotating basis, different priests served the Temple. As we enter this story, Zacharias is serving his turn, minding God’s business in the Holy Place, when the angel Gabriel angel showed up!

Gabriel (whose name means “God is great”) announced incredible news: “Zacharias, your prayers have been answered. You and Elizabeth are going to be parents!”

Undoubtedly Zacharias was thrilled at the news Gabriel brought. After all those years of waiting and hoping and praying they would finally have a child.

But Zacharias had a question. Roughly translated, he asked Gabriel, “*How can I know this ‘fer sure?’*”

Well, that was the wrong question to have asked! Gabriel stood in the presence of God. He spoke with authority. He was to be believed!

And Gabriel, rebuking Zacharias for this faithlessness, struck him dumb. This father-to-be would be unable to talk until the child was born.

Now, Zacharias was taking far longer in the Holy Place than the priest normally required to finish his work.

And the people who had gathered outside suspected that something was up. They were wondering at Zacharias’ delay, perhaps fearing that he had been struck dead.²

Not that they feared death due to old age (although you forty-somethings can’t be too careful), but because ministering in the presence of God was fraught with danger.

Zacharias, though, hadn’t been struck **dead**. He had been struck **dumb!**

And sure enough, when Zacharias walked out of the Temple, just like the angel said, he was unable to speak a word.

The Birth of John the Baptist! (1:57-80)

But also, just like the angel said, not long after he returned to his home in the hill country of Judea, his wife Elizabeth conceived and became pregnant!

It is easy to imagine that the months of Elizabeth’s pregnancy were sheer delight. Granted, there wasn’t much husband/wife talking, but they were both surely filled with joy at the prospect of having a child.

And not just “a child.” Zacharias and Elizabeth were given the bonus of knowing that their son would be great in the eyes of the Lord. (Luke 1:15) He would be the forerunner to the long-awaited Messiah! What parent wouldn’t love to know, in advance, that their son, their daughter, would walk with God and would make a difference for God?

That was the assurance that Zacharias and Elizabeth had about their son. And after the long months (years!) of expecting, the day finally arrived. Elizabeth delivered a baby boy.

As soon as Zacharias indicated by writing (Luke 1:63) that his name would be called “John” (the name that Gabriel had told him to give the child), Zacharias’ tongue was loosed and he began praising God!

All in all, it is a beautiful story! An elderly couple - well into their forties (!) - are given the gift of a child whose life will count for God. The whole thing is overwhelmingly GOOD NEWS.

² The book of Exodus tells us that the High Priest’s robe had bells tied on to the bottom of his robe, so that the people could hear the sound of him moving around in the Holy of Holies as he was offering sacrifice and making atonement for the people. If they didn’t hear the sound of the bells, they would know that he had been

struck dead, and that the Lord had been displeased with the sacrifice. (Exodus 28:33ff)

Elizabeth was the talk of the town, the toast of the town, the pride of the town. Zacharias was the proudest papa on the street. And John is the most celebrated baby in the hill country of Judea. Friends, relatives and neighbors all join in the rejoicing!

The story of the birth of John the Baptist is a wonderful story. And intertwined with the remarkable, joy-filled, nothing but happiness (!) story of that birth, we find another birth story.

This second story traces some of the details of an even more remarkable birth. Yet, while there is joy in this story, the events surrounding the birth AND the birth itself are much more about disruption than joy.

Six months after his visit to Zacharias, the angel Gabriel was commissioned by God to make another “*Coming Attractions*” announcement, this time to another woman who had never been a mother, a much younger woman.

The Story of the Birth of Jesus (Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-19)

Good News for Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

Gabriel greets Mary! (vv. 26-29)

[26] Now in the sixth month (the sixth month of Elizabeth’s pregnancy) **the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth, [27] to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.**³ **[28] And coming in, he said to her, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.” [29] But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was.**

We’re not surprised that Mary was troubled by the angel’s greeting - both by the fact that she was being greeted by an angel, and by the greeting this angel had to give her! Based on the evidence we have from the Bible, greetings from angels can be pretty disconcerting!

³ By referring to Mary as a virgin, Gabriel means to say that she had never been intimate with a man. She was engaged to Joseph, but they weren’t married and hadn’t consummated their relationship.

While she was pondering this strange greeting, Gabriel spoke to Mary’s fear, just as he had done with Zacharias, and announced Good News to her.

Gabriel announces Good News to Mary (vv. 30-34)

[30] The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. [31] “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus.”⁴ [32] “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; [33] and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”

Now if any father would have been glad to have heard the news Zacharias received about the birth of his son, John, I’ve got to believe that any prospective mother would be happy to hear this kind of news about her soon to be born child.

But Mary is confused. The angel seems to be speaking about a conception that is imminent - and Mary knew enough biology to know that this couldn’t happen. She was a virgin and was not married.

[34] “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”⁵

The announcement was outlandish. Philip Yancey writes the following in a book that I highly recommend to anyone who wants to know more about Jesus, The Jesus I Never Knew:

“I recall watching an episode of the TV show *Thirtysomething* in which Hope, a Christian, argues with her Jewish husband, Michael, about the holidays. ‘Why do you even bother with Hanukkah?’ she asks. ‘Do you really believe a handful of Jews held off a huge army by using a bunch of lamps that miraculously wouldn’t run out of oil?’

⁴ His name, *Jesus*, (Yeshua) means SAVIOR.

⁵ Some have thought that Mary’s confusion was because she was pre-pubescent. Her question, then, “How can this be?” had less to do with her sexual purity, and more with her physical inability to conceive. This seems to me to be less likely.

Michael explodes. ‘Oh, and Christmas makes more sense? Do you really believe an angel appeared to some teenage girl who then got pregnant without even having had sex and traveled on horseback to Bethlehem where she spent the night in a barn and had a baby who turned out to be the Savior of the world?’”

We understand Mary’s confusion. So did Gabriel and he responded to Mary’s honest question (a “how” question, as opposed to Zacharias’ “if” question) with an honest, patient answer.

Gabriel “explains” the Good News to Mary (vv. 35-38)

[35] The angel answered and said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. [36] And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month. [37] For nothing will be impossible with God.”

And as soon as she heard Gabriel’s explanation, Mary submissively accepted the angels’ message as Gospel.

[38] Behold, the bonds slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.

“OK. The Child I will bear will be uniquely conceived. Somehow, what my mother told me about the birds and the bees won’t apply. Without sex, without a man, I will become pregnant by the agency of the Almighty.”

And, just like that, she accepted her role in God’s plan with quiet trust.

For a long time, I have believed that Mary’s words, ***“Behold the bonds slave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to Your word”*** are the most liberating words any of us can ever say. It is to place ourselves, our fortunes, our futures, our welfare, our loved ones, our hopes and dreams - all of it, in the hands of God.

Now I personally think that there are some who make too much of Mary and who place too much emphasis on her. But I also think that it is possible to make too little of her.

These words (v. 38), spoken in response to Gabriel’s words, are about as good as it gets when it comes to a genuine, robust FAITH, and it explains why we should hold Mary in high esteem.

This day, Mary invites you and me to join her in total abandonment to the will of God!

Shortly after the angel departed, Mary went to stay with Elizabeth and Zacharias in their home in the hill country of Judea. She remained with them for about three months.⁶

When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, Mary left to return to her home in Nazareth. And, then, of course, we read the narrative describing the events surrounding the birth of her Son, Jesus.

But have you ever noticed that not one word is written about the months that passed in the interim for Mary? What would those months of pregnancy have been like for Mary?

With no written record, we can only speculate. But, using a little sanctified imagination, we can envision a rather uncomfortable time, not only physically, but also socially.

- I find it hard to believe that anyone in Nazareth believed that Mary and Joseph had not been intimate.⁷
- I find it difficult to believe that Mary was invited to many parties during months 3-9 in the conservative Jewish community of Nazareth.
- I would find it easy to believe that people looked down their noses at her - and, eventually at Joseph, too, when he agreed to take her as his wife before the time originally set for the wedding.

While Mary would have had the comfort of knowing that she was carrying God’s Son, she would likely also have been carrying around the pain of being ostracized from friends and family.

I consider that likelihood one of the Christmas “uglies.”

⁶ The first three months of her own pregnancy and the last three of Elizabeth’s

⁷ Matthew’s Gospel tells us that Joseph suspected Mary of being intimate with someone else before the angel set him straight.

But Mary's embarrassment was not the only "ugly" of the Christmas story. There are more.

Luke prepares us for the focus on the birth of Jesus by shifting our focus from the backwater village of Nazareth to the center of political power, Rome. He mentions a decree proclaimed by Caesar Augustus.

Caesar Takes a Census (vv. 1-3)

[2:1] Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census⁸ be taken of all the inhabited earth. [2] This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. [3] And everyone was on his way to register for the census, each to his own city.

Like any good story-teller, Luke gives the historical context of the events he is about to describe. It all took place, not, "Once upon a time..." but **[2:2]...while Quirinius was governor of Syria.** With those words, he ushers us into the politics of the day.

We know from documents surviving from this time period that Rome took a census every fourteen years in Egypt, and it is likely that the policy would have been the same for Palestine.⁹

The fact of the census should be accepted at face value. But the implications of a census being taken of the Jews at the command of the Roman Emperor thousands of miles away should alert us to the reality that when Jesus was born, God's people were a subject people and that Israel found herself squarely under the thumb of imperial Rome.

Why does Luke mention the census? To put the story of the birth of Jesus in its proper historical context and to show how it was insured that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem.

⁸ When Augustus died he left in his own handwriting a summary of information, such as statistics on direct and indirect taxation, which would most naturally have been derived from censuses.

⁹ Actual documents survive for every census from AD 20 to 270 (so Barclay).

Joseph and Mary Travel to Bethlehem for the Census (vv. 4-5)

[4] Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem,¹⁰ because he was of the house and family of David, [5] in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.

Tracing the lineage of Joseph

The two Gospel genealogies, found in Matthew and Luke, list the ancestors of Mary and Joseph. I think that the simplest way to explain the differences in the genealogies is to say that Luke (chapter 3) traces Jesus' ancestry through Mary, while Matthew (chapter 1) traces the royal lineage of Jesus back through all the Jewish Kings of Judah to King David.¹¹

Joseph descended from the likes of Solomon and Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah and Josiah. And, while he himself was a carpenter in Nazareth, royal blood flowed through his veins. For this reason he had to register in the royal city of Bethlehem.

Tracing the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem

It would have taken at least a week for Joseph and Mary to have traveled the one hundred miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

They (not actually married yet, according to verse 5¹²) would have loaded the donkey with all the food and supplies necessary for such a trip.

They would have headed due east to the Jordan River, skirting Mount Tabor to the north. Then, going south on the eastern side of the Jordan so as to avoid Samaria, they would have continued until they came to a suitable place to cross the Jordan opposite Judea.

¹⁰ There is no record of Jesus ever visiting Bethlehem after His birth.

¹¹ This is one of the proofs of Jesus' Messiahship. The Messiah had to be "David's son." Reconciling the genealogies, though, is difficult...

¹² Luke refers to Mary as Joseph's betrothed. This means that they were engaged. Matthew says that Joseph took Mary as his wife, but that does not mean that they officially married. Only that he cared for her as a husband cares for his wife (Mt. 1:25).

While we don't know exactly when this journey took place, my own studies lead me to the conclusion that they traveled in December and that they were as cold as we sometimes get in the Hill Country of Central Texas.

No, they would not have had to deal with a Minnesota arctic blast, but it sure could have been chilly enough to be very uncomfortable.

Now that we have landed in Bethlehem, Luke describes the birth of Mary's Child simply and with restraint.

Mary Gives Birth to Jesus (vv. 6-7)

Reflecting on the ordeal of childbirth

[6] While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. [7] And she gave birth to her firstborn son...

Notice that there was no skilled physician or midwife to help with this birth. There was no birthing room with soft lights, no music playing in the background, no attendants, no pain killers.

Under the best of circumstances, childbirth is difficult. Giving birth is not called "labor" for nothing. Mary gave birth to Jesus under less than ideal circumstances.

No details are provided. Only that at the end, after the exhausting work was done, Jesus was born. Mary did the honors of laying Him down in His first cradle.

Reflecting on the "birthing room"

[7b]...and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger

That she laid Jesus down in a manger means that He was born in a barn. The scenes popping up all around town of animals attending Jesus' birth are, in large measure, accurate.

More accurately, the barn was probably not a red-painted wooden outbuilding, but a hollowed out limestone cave.¹³ And the manger in which He was laid was not a heavy, wooden feeding trough but a stone trough.

And why didn't Joseph find a more pleasant place for the birth of Mary's Baby?

Reflecting on Bethlehem

[7c]...because there was no room for them in the inn

I'm betting that Joseph did his best to find suitable lodging. But there was no room in the only lodging place in town. You know, when the "No Vacancy" sign blinks, there are no vacancies.

But what does it say about the times in which Jesus was born that in a small village like Bethlehem, nobody would give up a bed for a teenage girl away from home about to give birth on a winter night? The coldness and callousness of that scene takes your breath away.

The glorious good news of these first seven verses is that Jesus was born. But the attending details don't leave us much opportunity for celebration.

Luke includes the details he does in these verses to highlight the lowlights of Jesus' inglorious entrance into the world He created.

#1: A TAXING SITUATION: Remember that the reason Joseph had to take the trip to Bethlehem in the first place was to register for the census and to pay taxes to Rome. Talk about an ugly reason for taking a trip!

#2 - MARY WAS A VERY PREGNANT TRAVELER: Then, too, Luke reminds us that they had been forced by law to travel one hundred miles (from Nazareth to Bethlehem) while Mary was on the verge of labor.¹⁴

¹³ Christian tradition has located Jesus' birthplace in a cave. The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is erected over a hollowed out cave believed to have been the place of Jesus' birth.

¹⁴ Ladies, can any of you imagine a one hundred mile donkey ride over rough terrain while on the verge of labor? Men, can you imagine putting your wife through that ordeal?

#3 - THERE WERE, AS YET, NO WEDDING BANDS: Luke emphasizes that Joseph and Mary were engaged - not married - as they traveled to Bethlehem together.¹⁵

#4 - THERE WAS NO ROOM IN THE INN: When they finally arrived in Bethlehem, they were denied a place to stay in the only lodging place in town because it was filled with travelers who were, like them, coming to pay their taxes.

#5 - JESUS' CRIB WAS A FEEDING TROUGH: Luke throws in this final detail about the Baby King's crib that really gets our attention.

Everything about the birth points to obscurity and poverty, to humility and rejection. A rather inauspicious beginning for the Son of God - but the night is young and there is more to come.

Following the birth of His Son, God planned a reception. Maybe not the reception you or I might have planned for the Son of God, but it was the reception God wanted for Jesus.

The next words from Luke transport us to a nearby field, where there are some shepherds.....

Jesus' "Welcoming Committee (2:8ff)

[8] In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened.

[10] But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; [11] for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹⁵ Interestingly enough, Matthew tells us that Joseph took Mary as his wife after the angel revealed to him in a dream that Mary's baby had been conceived by the agency of the Holy Spirit. The apparent discrepancy between Matthew and Luke is likely resolved by understanding that they were not formally married until after the birth, but that Joseph treated her as his wife (except for the fact that he kept her a virgin) throughout the pregnancy.

[13] And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, [14] "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

[15] When the angels had gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds began saying to one another, "Let us go straight to Bethlehem then, and see this thing that has happened which the Lord has made known to us." [16] So they came in a hurry and found their way to Mary and Joseph, and the baby as He lay in the manger. [17] When they had seen this, they made known the statement which had been told them about this Child. [18] And all who heard it wondered at the things which were told them by the shepherds. [19] But Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart. [20] The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

Scripture gives an honored place to shepherds. Abel, Adam's righteous son, was a shepherd. So were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Jacob's sons identified as shepherds. Moses was a shepherd when God called him to lead Israel out of Egypt and so was David before he became king.

Yet in the days of Jesus, shepherds were looked down upon and had quite a bad reputation.

Because their occupation kept them in the fields for much of the year, they missed regular times of worship and weren't able to observe the finer points of ceremonial law which meant so much to religious people.

Because they missed regular worship, the Rabbis prohibited them from participating in the Temple services at all, even when they were able.

For a variety of reasons, they had a low standing in the community. Their livelihood brought them in contact with uncleanness on a regular basis. They were considered unreliable and were not allowed to give testimony in a court of law.¹⁶

¹⁶ One commentator references their regrettable habit of confusing "mine" with "thine" as they moved about the country.....

It is quite possible that the shepherds we find here in Luke, chapter 2 were devout men. But they did come from a despised class of people.

And they composed the welcoming committee God orchestrated for His Son's entrance into our world.

And THAT - along with the other "uglies" - is the story of Christmas.

Conclusion:

If you were a marketing consultant doing some work for the Creator, it is possible that you might suggest changing a detail or two about Jesus' birth.

"Let's change the scenery a bit, Lord. Bethlehem is OK, but there's a nice hotel there - it's a five star for dignitaries visiting nearby Jerusalem. Lots of government official are using it these days. That would be a good place to stage the birth.

"And then the shepherds. Shepherds are nice enough folks. I like shepherds. Some of my best friends are shepherds. But trust me on this one - not for the birth of Your Son. The welcoming committee at the birth should be the right kind of people. Let's get the Temple officials to come over from Jerusalem, Herod and his family, maybe invite Caesar. We'll make sure the paparazzi are out in force."

"And there should be a reception for Mary and Joseph as they head into town. Let's bill it, 'Son of David Comes Home at Last!' - banners, streamers, crowds, parades, the whole nine yards.

"And, I like the virgin birth. But the 'engaged' bit doesn't work well. Joseph needs to make the marriage official prior to the conception. Let's take care of that one, OK?"

All excellent suggestions IF what God had wanted to do was exalt Jesus at His birth. But that wasn't what God intended. His plan was for Jesus to walk the roads of humility and servanthood and sacrifice so that He could bring you and me to God.

This morning, we worship a Jesus who did not seek popularity, publicity, comfort, safety or ease.

He endured ugliness so that you and I might experience the beauty of a relationship with God.

Merry Christmas!! May the Jesus who humbled Himself to bring you life find room in YOUR heart this day as you trust Him.