

98-12-20a

As we continue our worship this morning, if you'll turn with me for our scripture reading to the Gospel of Luke, Luke chapter 2. Of course, at this time of the year, we direct our attention especially to the coming of Jesus Christ, his birth in Bethlehem and the revelations from angels to his parents and to his other relatives. We have Elizabeth and Zachariah, the parents of John the Baptist. There is a great deal of special communication given at that time.

It had been hundreds of years since God had manifested himself in a visible way in Israel. And yet, at the time of Jesus' birth, you suddenly have angels in the skies. You have supernatural stars in the sky.

You have angelic visitation to several people, both to Zacharias in the temple, to Mary, to Joseph, to the shepherds, to the wise men, of course, seeing the star and being warned in a dream and so forth. There is a great deal of supernatural activity that accompanied this perhaps most momentous of events in Israel's history from the time that God had conceived them as a nation and brought them out of the land of Egypt. This particular section of the Gospel of Luke deals with two things.

As you look in verse 46 and following, you have the Song of Mary, which we have looked at, I think, a Christmas or two ago in comparison and contrast with the Song of Hannah recorded in 1 Samuel when she found out that God had answered her prayers and that her son would be born. And both of these ladies exhibit in their songs of thanksgiving and songs of praise the reason that God chose them to be the mothers of these individuals, the reason Hannah was the mother of Samuel and was allowed to train and raise him all the way up to the age of seven, isn't that she was just another woman in Israel and God sort of threw a dart at the map and settled on that household and that young lady. In the same way, Mary, the mother of Jesus, was not chosen randomly.

God didn't just sort of open the telephone book of ancient Israel and stick his finger down on a page and select her at random. There is a reason why God chose her. And when Gabriel comes and says, you are most favored among women, there's a reason for that.

There's a reason why God's favor rests on her. And we see it in this song that begins in verse 46 of Luke 1. Because when she hears the message from the angel Gabriel when she visits her relative Elizabeth and Elizabeth confirms her own role and the role of her son in this thing, Mary composes this song and this isn't something that just came off the top of her head but this is a result of her meditation, it's a result of what is in her soul. And she says, beginning in verse 46, My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God my Savior.

For he has regarded the lowly state of his maidservant. For behold, henceforth, all generations will call me blessed. For he who is mighty has done great things for me, and

holy is his name.

And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm. He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.

He has put down the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.

As we reflect on what Mary says in this song, does it strike you at all? We think at Christmas time about the coming of Jesus and he's going to be the Savior, the child who was born to die in a sense. We recognize his role in God's plan at the very pinnacle and apex of God's plan for humanity. But Mary doesn't seem to really dwell on that.

She doesn't say, oh, at last deliverance has come from sin. We've been laboring under the yoke of the law and so forth. What does she focus on in her song? She says in verse 49, He who is mighty has done great things for me, holy is his name.

And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation. He has scattered the proud, he has put down the mighty, he has exalted the lowly. At this point, when the announcement of Jesus' birth has been made, but he's not yet been born, Mary is thinking just like any of us would think, if a supernatural visitation came and God said, guess what, you're going to play a central role in my grand plan for the ages, what would our reaction naturally be? Well, why me? What sparked this choice? Is this just the sovereign, inscrutable will of God to sort of randomly select? But Mary, in thinking about this, realizes why she has been chosen.

Because there are many in Israel, this was a time, people knew the prophecies of Daniel. They knew about the 69 weeks until the coming of Messiah the Prince. There were many messiahs that had already risen up, false messiahs.

There had been a stir out in the desert and a man had very recently, to this time, had come up and had had followers in the wilderness and they had tracked him down and driven him out of the land and so forth. But there were also people who had a genuine expectation, who weren't led astray by the false Christs, the false messiahs, who didn't have a substitute for the coming of Messiah, who were looking for the salvation of Israel, who knew their Old Testament scriptures and who were watching, who were expectant. These people, unfortunately for the nation of Israel, were not in positions of spiritual leadership.

There is a high priest in Israel at this time, isn't there? There is a convocation of the Sanhedrin, the 70, where the highest and greatest religious leaders of the day hold court and consort with one another and sort of dispense wisdom from the mountain, as it

were, to the rest of Israel. The angels didn't appear to any member of the Sanhedrin, didn't appear to any of the Pharisees, didn't appear to the high priest. Where did the angels go to announce the greatest happening in human history? They went to a band of shepherds sitting out on the hillside.

They went to a young lady who was obscure and unknown in Israel, on the outside seemingly no different than anyone else. So, naturally, Mary, as it says later on, as she watches her son grow up, she stores these things up in her heart and ponders them. This is a pattern in her life.

This is something she's done, apparently from childhood, to think about things in the context of her relationship with God. She treasures things up in her heart. She ponders on them.

That's why, when this takes place, she has something in her soul to apply. She has a way to comprehend this and to understand it. She says, I see that God Most High, it takes nothing away from God's grace.

It takes nothing away from God's sovereignty. But at the same time, there is a principle that God uses prepared people. God uses people who have a heart for Him, who are seeking Him, who treasure the things of God in their heart and ponder on them in their daily lives.

This is something that Mary has done. That's why she can compose this song. She says, He has regarded the lowly state of His maidservant.

God has seen me. We saw last week in studying Hagar. Even though she is not the legitimate mother of the heir of Abraham, even though she's an Egyptian and the whole relationship is illegitimate, when she's persecuted and is driven out of the household by Sarai, God sees her.

God hears her. And because she is responsive to God, God blesses her. God makes a covenant and makes promises for her son, even though the whole situation is illegitimate.

She calls the name of the place Bir Lahai Roi. This is the place of the God who sees me. This is the place that the angel comes and says, God has heard you.

God has seen you. And Mary says, God has heard me. God has seen me.

She has grown up with a hunger and a thirst for the things of God. And even though she's lowly and insignificant, she's a woman in a patriarchal society. She has no chance of going to a synagogue school or becoming a great scholar of the Word of God.

She probably has to get her information here and there from scattered sources. But she

loves God, and she thinks about Him, and God responds. And she says, God has seen me in my lowly estate, and He's answered the prayers of my heart.

He who is mighty has done great things for me, in verse 49. Holy is His name. His reputation, His character are above reproach.

He honors His promises no matter who you are. His mercy is on those who fear Him. She has received God's mercy, hasn't she? In a great way.

Why? Because she is a person who fears God. She isn't taken by surprise by the appearance of God in her life. God has been a part of her life for a long time.

He has shown strength with His arm. He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. You can imagine that there was a lot of religious speculation about the Messiah, a lot of grand interpretation of the book of Daniel and the other Old Testament scriptures about the suffering servant and the conquering king and so forth.

There was a great deal of confusion. All of these learned men with all of their knowledge and study were confused and didn't understand the nature of the Messiah or the nature of His mission. And this is why they missed it.

It reminds me of a little funny thing that the Statesman Quartet used to do when they would sing in concert. There is a song called The Fourth Man. It talks about Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego in the fire.

And the verse portion of that song before you get to the chorus is spoken. And so Hobie Lister would brag on them ahead of time and say, now I'm going to show you the versatility of the Statesman Quartet. They're going to speak this spoken part, this verse, and they're going to sound like a single voice.

They're going to be so close together that it's going to sound like one person doing the talking. So then they start and they begin saying this, and it is really good. It's hard for four people to speak exactly in unison.

They do really well, but then toward the end, Cat Freeman, the tenor, starts growling and slowing down and saying extra words, and he gets way off. And so Hobie stops the whole song and he says, who is it? You've embarrassed me. I've bragged on you all.

And he asks each one of them. They say, no, it wasn't me. And then he comes up to Cat Freeman.

He says, well, I don't know who it was, but I was doing it right, and the rest of these guys were off. And so Hobie says, you mean to tell me that we got all the way through this song and these three guys, you got it right and they all missed it? You know, the minority against the majority. And, of course, you have to be there to appreciate it.

But the point is, sometimes it's true. Sometimes the majority may all be singing in unison, may all be speaking in unison, and they missed it. And the one lone voice got it right.

And in this case, at this time in Israel, it's the unrecognized, the insignificant, the people that don't have stature like shepherds and foreigners and young women who have been hearing the voice of the Lord and who don't miss it. So that's what she talks about here when she says, he has scattered the proud in the imaginations of their heart. Why did they miss it? It's because of pride.

People started taking pride in their station, pride in their Pharisaic standing or their standing in the Sanhedrin or in the priestly structure. He has put down, in verse 52, the mighty from their thrones and exalted the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things.

And by working backward from what Mary says, we know that she is one who fears God. She is one who is hungry and whose hunger has been filled. God has rewarded her, just as Jesus will say some 30 years hence, ask and it shall be given, seek and ye shall find, knock and it will be opened to you.

If which of you being a father, if your child comes to you and asks for bread, we'll give him a rock or a snake or a scorpion. If you being evil know how to answer these requests from your children, how much more your heavenly father will give good things to those who ask him. So the fact that Mary has received these good things, these great things, in terms of this privilege, is a result of a lifestyle.

So it's an encouragement to us to remember, as we think during this time of the season, all the wonderful events surrounding the birth of Jesus Christ, that God honors the faithful. It doesn't matter what our station is. It doesn't matter what our level of recognition is in the world.

What matters is our heart before God. And God is the God who sees, just as Hagar recognized and just as Mary recognizes here. And he helps his servants in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his seed forever.

And there's a wonderful meaning in that very last phrase, to Abraham and to his seed, because later on Paul is going to say that we are all the seed of Abraham by faith, which transcends the racial boundaries of Israel, transcends the covenants to Israel, and goes to the very heart of God's plan, which is righteousness by faith, blessing and reward from God by faith. So we're going to be returning to Luke chapter 1 shortly. But let's begin now our study for this morning, which is Christ's appearance.

Normally we would be in Genesis. But this is a very happy confluence of circumstances, because back in Genesis chapter 16 and 17, we're seeing the birth of sons to Abraham

and the both legitimate and illegitimate way that God's promises are fulfilled. What did God say to Abraham? He told him when he was back in Ur, Get up out of your people, out of your kindred, go to the land that I will show you.

I will make of you a great nation. He later expands and explains that promise and gives details. Part of it is, you will have a son.

Abraham goes to God and says, I have no son, right now my heir is my servant born in my house. God says, you're going to have a child from your own body. And then, nothing happens.

And time goes by, years go by, ten years go by, Abraham's been in the land ten years, there's no son, no sign of the fulfillment of the promise. So, it puts us in mind of Israel. Israel had received that great scroll of Isaiah, that God's redemption would come in the form of the Messiah.

They had the scroll of Daniel, that talked about the coming of Messiah, the Prince. But nothing happened. Years went by, decades went by, centuries went by, and there was no fulfillment of the promise.

What happened in Abraham's case? Well, he fell for a suggested substitute. Sarai comes up and says, Abraham, I'm not getting any younger, I want to be the mother of a child, and since I can't conceive and bear one, let's find an alternative means. And then you have the whole plan Hagar implemented, and Ishmael's birth.

But Ishmael, God says, is not the legitimate heir. What happened in Israel? What happened in Israel after that long wait for the Messiah? Didn't come, didn't come, and so Israel looks for a substitute. The Messiah is coming to redeem Israel from their sins, He's coming to Israel to give them life.

Jesus is going to point this out to the Israelites when He preaches to them. If you look over in John chapter 5 and verse 39, Jesus is talking about Himself and His purpose in coming. The witness that bears testimony to who He is and the fulfillment of God's purpose in Him.

He talks about His cousin John the Baptist who came and bore witness to Him. He says in verse 35 of John 5, John, He was the burning and shining lamp, and you were willing for a time to rejoice in His light. But I have a greater witness than John's, for the works which the Father has given Me to finish, the very works that I do, bear witness of Me that the Father has sent Me.

And the Father Himself who sent Me has testified of Me. You have neither heard His voice at any time nor seen His form. But you do not have His word abiding in you, because whom He sent, Him you do not believe.

This could have been an option. If Mary had been of this same ilk, if Zacharias or Elizabeth had been of this ilk, had been of this heart, when the revelation came, they could have said, well, what did I eat last night that gave me that strange dream? That can't be true. You search the Scriptures.

This is the substitute. And it's an easy thing to see. It's an easy thing to understand because are the Scriptures holy? Were they given by God, written with the finger of God and brought down from Mount Sinai by Moses and given to Israel? They were.

But Jesus says in verse 39 of John 5, You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life. And these are they which testify of Me. You've accepted the messenger and now you have put the messenger for the message.

The law, the Scriptures, are the messenger bringing you the good news of God's deliverance in Christ. But you've settled for the Scriptures and you've made your Savior the Scriptures. This takes nothing away from the greatness of the Scriptures, the perfection and the holiness of the Scriptures, but you can't misuse the Scriptures.

You can't put them instead of Christ. And in the same way that Abram and Sarai end up with an illegitimate heir because they couldn't wait and because they lost their faith for a time, Israel, over the duration of the centuries, has lost its faith, has lost its watchfulness and its alertness and its heart, the heart that Mary has, the hunger for the things of God. And so when Christ comes, they don't even recognize Him.

They are still cherishing the scrolls and holding up the scrolls in the synagogue. We don't want to make that mistake. And sometimes in our pursuit of understanding of God, we run the same risk.

There is no one that is more profoundly committed to the Scriptures than we are. We have a desire to learn the truth of the Word of God, but we don't want to stop at the Scriptures and miss the Savior that they communicate. It needs to go beyond our knowledge of the Scriptures, our ability to quote Scripture or to rattle off doctrines or to give the details of the plan of God.

It needs to enter into our hearts. It needs to satisfy the hunger that is there in our hearts to know and to serve God. This is the thing that was missing in Israel.

And this, in fact, was the problem in that generation. So as we look this morning at the appearance of Christ, why did He come? What is the purpose of the events that we celebrate at this time of year? As you well know, this is not the time of year that Jesus was born. He wasn't born in the wintertime.

He was born in the spring. There are many details of Scripture that let us know this, not the least of which is the organization of the Jewish calendar with the two New Years. You have the religious calendar and the civil calendar.

Rosh Hashanah is the beginning of the year in one calendar. And you have the other New Years that falls in the spring. There's a lot of detail we could go into.

But suffice it to say that the reason we celebrate Christ's birth at this time of the year is because there used to be a great, grand pagan celebration at the winter solstice, which is December 21. And the church, in an effort to kind of overwrite and replace some of these pagan festivals, chose this to be the celebration of Christ's birth. But we still have, as you see behind me here, the tree of plenty and all the other things that are sort of holdovers from the pagan side in the same way that you have rabbits and eggs at Easter.

But we are nothing if not flexible. And these things have taken on a meaning of their own in our culture. And there are some purists who won't have a Christmas tree and who won't let their kids color eggs and so forth.

And I think a knowledgeable observance of these traditions. And we can convert them and make them our own. We can use them for our own purposes and assign them our own significance.

I don't have to be guided or ruled by somebody else's construction of these things. But we celebrate at this time of year the birth of Christ, his appearance in history. What does the scripture have to say about the purpose of it? We would answer that question if I handed out a little blank piece of paper and said, in 50 words or less, give the purpose for the birth of Christ in the stable in Bethlehem.

Why did he come? Most of us would say, well, he came to die. He came to be the sacrifice for our sins. And that's absolutely true.

Is that the sum total of his purpose? What does the scripture say? One of the surprising things are some of these things that scripture says about the coming of Christ. Look with me back in the Gospel of Luke, in chapter 5, Jesus himself is going to state his purpose in coming. Luke chapter 5, verses 31 and 32.

This is the occasion where Matthew the tax collector, or Levi the tax collector, is called, and he's very happy to be called. So Matthew, or Levi here, gives a great feast in his house. The scribes and the Pharisees, in verse 30, complained against his disciples, why do you eat and drink with tax collectors and sinners? Here is the essence of the contrast that we've been talking about, isn't it? Here are people making an issue out of their religious standard.

Oh, you're consorting with the riffraff here. You're consorting with the lowly and those who are beneath consideration. Jesus answered and said to them, those who are well have no need of a physician but those who are sick.

I have not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance. Sinners to repentance. I

have come to call sinners to repentance.

Who are these sinners? What category can we place them in? Well, these specifically are the lost sheep of the house of Israel. That sounds a little bit, it grates a little on our ear at first to think, well, did Jesus, did he only come to Israel? What about us? Well, we'll come to that. But turn forward in Luke to chapter 15, verses 4 through 7. What man of you having a hundred sheep, Luke 15, 4, if he loses one of them, does not leave the ninety and nine in the wilderness and go after the one which is lost until he finds it.

In our study of the parables, we spent some time on this set of three parables, the lost sheep, the lost coins, and the lost son. And you'll recall at that time that in each case, this is not a new acquisition. This is something that was possessed and then went astray.

You have 100 sheep. They're all the same kind of sheep. They're all in a pen.

One of them strays. One of them goes away and gets lost. But it is owned.

It belongs to the owner. It isn't a wild sheep. It would have been a hundred different ways that God could have communicated the acquisition of something that didn't used to be his.

But this is a sheep that belonged to him that strayed. And this is the status of the nation of Israel. This is the status of the people of Israel.

They belong to God. They are treated throughout the Scriptures as believers. Every time you find in the Old Testament or the New, God dealing with Israel, they are treated as belonging to him.

Even over in Paul's writings in Romans, when he says don't boast against the branches, he said some of the branches have been broken out of the tree and you've been grafted in, but don't boast against them because you only stand by faith. And if they start exercising faith, they can be grafted back in. So they are people of faith who lost or abandoned that faith and dried up his branches and were snapped out.

The whole picture of the tree and the branches is the opportunity to be fruitful in God's plan. And you stand and are able to be fruitful by abiding in the vine, by being a branch plugged into the trunk. When faith leaves, when faith takes a vacation, any branch, whether it's Israelite or Gentile, can be broken out.

And the return to faith will graft that branch back in. So he says when he comes home in verse 6, he calls together his friends and neighbors, saying to them, Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost. I say to you that likewise there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over 99 just persons who need no repentance.

Jesus Christ came to seek and to save that which was lost. The nation of Israel has been

broken through discipline from God. They've lost their land.

They've lost their sovereignty. They've lost the throne of King David. They are under the thumb of Roman rule.

All of these things have taken place because as a nation, as a people, they have abandoned their faith in God. This is the message of the Major and the Minor Prophets in the Old Testament. Not that they aren't saved.

Not that they don't believe in God. It's just they don't have an active faith in God, a daily living faith and trust. They're putting their trust in something else.

They're even putting their trust in the things of God rather than in God Himself. As Jesus told the scribes and Pharisees, You put your faith in the Scripture. You think in it you have eternal life.

But it's not their knowledge of the law. It's not their memorization of all these paragraphs. It's their living relationship with God.

This is what Mary had. This, I believe, is what the shepherds had. Why did the angels appear to the shepherds? Well, there were probably many shepherds in Israel.

You remember what Jesus told the Pharisees. He said, you know, in the days of Elijah, there were a lot of widows in Israel. But there was one that God sent the prophet to who got blessed with the crews of oil and the barrel of flour that never ran dry.

There were many widows at that time. But there was one who received the blessing of God. Why? Because she was a woman of faith.

There were many lepers in Israel. There were many scattered sick at the Pool of Bethesda. But there was one man that Jesus healed there.

And we tend to think, well, Jesus healed everything and everybody in the whole land of Israel. He didn't. There were many occasions where He either didn't heal at all, He left before they were all healed, or when He walks into the Pool of Bethesda, He healed one man.

People who would respond in faith. And what happens, there's lots of shepherds who are out watching their flocks by night. The angels could have appeared to other shepherds who look at each other and say, what was in that wineskin? I've just had a wild dream.

Who, no matter what supernatural manifestation they saw, would not have followed it, would not have responded, wouldn't have left their responsibility for the sheep and gone to seek the child. These shepherds did. Why? Because they recognized a message from God when they heard it.

And they believed it. And they acted on that belief. When the angels came and said, there's a child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

They said, great, let's go see it. It's real in their mind. They believed the Word of God and they acted on it.

That's faith. The Word of God came in visible bodily form to the religious leaders of the day, to the majority of the people in Israel. They saw it.

They touched it. They saw Jesus do miracles. And they didn't respond.

As a people and as a nation, as a generation, they didn't respond. They hung Him on the cross instead. So the separator, what is the difference? It's faith.

Jesus came to the people of God to call them to repentance, to call them to a change of mind. They are His sheep. In Psalm 100, it says, we are His people, the sheep of His pasture.

And time and again, it's kind of difficult because we're so used, we've been grown up thinking, well, it's believers and unbelievers. And in Israel, there was a mix. And in a lot of generations of Israel, they probably were just all hell-bound unbelievers.

It's interesting, though, that the scriptures never called them to recognize the existence of God or come to belief in God. It is always obedience. And obedience is not a means of salvation.

Obedience is a responsibility for the people of God. And when the scriptures constantly call Israel to obedience, that's not a call to salvation. That's a call to repentance.

That's a call to change of mind, to come and live up to the responsibility and the opportunity that the people of God have. The people who came out of Egypt under the blood of the Passover lamb dropped in the wilderness and didn't enter Canaan. Why? The promises of God were not mixed with faith in them that heard it.

Their blood bought redeemed people of God, but their daily life, their daily trust in God wasn't there, and they dropped in the wilderness. Not loss of salvation, but loss of fruitfulness, loss of reward. This is what Jesus came to do, the scripture tells us time and again.

Look down in chapter 15, verse 10 of Luke. Likewise, I say to you, there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner who repents. Someone who acknowledges that they've been out of the will of God and who changes his mind.

Same thing in verse 32, after the parable of the lost son. It is right that we should make merry and be glad. The prodigal son, your brother, was dead and is alive again, was lost and is found.

Two sons, they both bear the same relationship to the father. One has stayed physically with his father, but his heart is far away. The other son has strayed from the father, but when he comes back, he has a heart of appreciation for the father.

He doesn't care about material things. He just wants to be back with his father. They're both sons.

They are brothers. They bear the same relationship to the father, but the one who never left is farther away than the one who strayed. And Jesus tells this story to make the point that the one who was dead and is alive again was lost and is found.

This is God's purpose. This is God's hope because Jesus Christ was sent primarily, firstly to Israel. He wasn't sent first and primarily to us.

He was sent first and primarily as a fulfillment of covenant promises to Israel and to give Israel the firstborn in God's plan. You have Israel in the church. We are the younger son.

And as is so often the case in God's revelation of His purpose in the Scriptures, the elder shall serve the younger. We wind up the last being first in God's plan. We're going to be the first to enjoy the heavenly realms.

The rapture of the church is going to take us into the presence of Christ before Israel is resurrected and brought into the kingdom seven years later because Israel, like Esau, has forfeited its inheritance. It hasn't forfeited salvation. It hasn't forfeited relationship with God.

It has forfeited inheritance. It has forfeited opportunity by not recognizing and valuing its inheritance and its opportunity. So we need to recognize that this is the purpose, the first advent.

Jesus Christ was not born in Chicago, was He? He was born in Israel of a Jewish mother from the tribe of Judah of the lineage of David because He's Jewish. He's an Israelite. He is the Messianic, Davidic King of Israel.

So again, when we sing, O come, let us adore Him, and get to the end of that first verse, it does make a difference. Jesus Christ was not born the King of angels. He's born the King of Israel.

By the way, He is not born the King of the church. And sometimes we get a little bit sloppy in our application of these things, which is fine. We're not being woodenly, literal, picky, thorough brow types and just trying to tear everything to shreds.

But it's important to realize Jesus Christ is not our King. He is the King of Israel. And when we sing, Crown Him with many crowns and so forth, we acknowledge His royalty and His place in God's plan.

But He's the King of Israel. But He's the head of the church. He is the firstborn among many brethren.

We are members of the royal family because we share His sonship, His heirship, His priesthood, and His election in God's plan. We are pre-designated because He is pre-designated. We're conformed to the image of God because He's conformed to the image of God's Son.

And so we have a much closer relationship to Christ than our King. He is our Savior. He is our intercessor.

He is the head of all things to the church. He is the groom, and we are the bride. He has many, many pictures.

But the Bible never applies the term King to Jesus Christ with reference to the church because He has a different role to fulfill. So when we think about the manger in Bethlehem cradling a King, it does. And it takes nothing away to recognize that that is the King of Israel, the Son of David.

And this is the fulfillment of the promise. It's fascinating to go back to Genesis 37, 16. You wouldn't think of this as a Christmas passage, but turn with me back to Genesis 37.

Beginning in verse... Well, we'll begin in the middle, in the vicinity of verse 12. You remember Joseph and his brethren. Joseph was favored by his father, given the coat, and so on.

His brothers, in verse 11, envied him, but his father kept the matter in mind. Then in verse 12, his brothers went to feed their father's flock in Shechem. And Israel said to Joseph, Are not your brothers feeding the flock in Shechem? Come, I will send you to them.

So he said to him, Here I am. Then he said to him, Please go and see if it is well with your brothers and well with the flocks, and bring back word to me. So he sent him out of the valley of Hebron, and he went to Shechem.

Now a certain man found him, and there he was wandering in the field. And the man asked him, saying, What are you seeking? So he, Joseph, said, I am seeking my brothers. Please tell me where they are feeding their flocks.

The man said, They have departed from here. For I heard them say, Let us go to Dothan. So Joseph went after his brothers and found them in Dothan.

We know what happened once he found his brothers in Dothan. That's when they throw him in the pit, sell him to the slave dealers, and away he goes. Put his blood on the coat and take it back to the father.

And it appears to the father that Joseph is dead. And it isn't until later that we find that in sort of a mirror of resurrection, Joseph is not dead after all, but is in fact the means of deliverance for the whole family. And there's a strong parallel, a suggestion and a foreshadowing of Jesus Christ here.

You know where Shechem is? All of these place names. You can't point to a place name in the Bible that doesn't have a significance beyond just a place on the map. I'll go ahead and tell you.

You can find this out on a map in the back of your Bible. But Shechem is the first place Abraham came to when he left Ur of the Chaldees. When he entered the land, the first place he stopped, the first place he built an altar, was at Shechem.

Shechem is the place of response to God. Shechem is the place where we decide what we're going to do. After we have left Ur of the Chaldees, after we have come to God through salvation and have a relationship with Him, we now have to make a choice.

And we come to Shechem. The interesting thing about Shechem is that if you stand in Shechem and look to the west, you see two giant mountain peaks, Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim. And in the later history of Israel, when they stand as they're going into the land of promise, the people stand on the slopes of Mount Ebal and Mount Gerizim.

And the blessings and the curses are read from those mountains. It's the place of decision. It's the place of choice.

Are you going to choose for God and be blessed? Are you going to be apathetic to God and be cursed? And this is a choice for the people of God. Israel, the covenant people, stands there and God says, here's your option as my people. You can be blessed or you can be disciplined.

Mount Ebal or Mount Gerizim, which will it be? That's where Shechem is. That's where the brothers are supposed to be with the flock when Joseph goes to seek his brethren and see how it goes with them, but they're not there. They've left.

And they didn't go south toward Hebron, the place of communion with God where Abram lives for many years. They go north to Dothan, which is in a pagan area. And so it is symbolic.

When Jesus comes to his brethren, he's wandering in the field. The field is there. The sheep could be grazing there, but they've left.

They're not in the place where they should be. And when he joins up with his brethren, they do him great mischief. This is a good place to pause in our study and take our break.

When we come back, we'll continue to see what the Scripture has to say about Christ's appearance.