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Sermon Notes

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Pondering the Infinite Mystery of the Incarnation

Luke 2:19

Christmas in Japan??

- My wife and I were missionaries in Japan for two unforgettable years
- The Japanese people were very kind and respectful to us
- The Japanese culture bore an outward similarity to America... McDonald's, Kentucky Fried Chicken, fast-paced life, large shopping malls like Sears and Belks, etc.
- But at its core, Japan was unconverted, non-Christian... and it didn't take long to see through the outward veneer to the truth: a nation of people who desperately needed Christ
- One of the strangest parts of the year for us was Christmas... amazingly to me, the stores and shopping malls and even the streets decked out for Christmas very much like we do here: Christmas trees, multi-colored lights, pictures of Santa Claus everywhere, Christmas music playing in the malls, etc.
- As we experienced this strange dichotomy—an unbelieving nation celebrating Christmas—it occurred to me that it wasn't much different here in America
- Our secular culture delights in the outward trappings of Christmas: the gifts, the parties, the celebration, the time off from work, the cultural traditions—"It's a Wonderful Life," "Miracle on 34th Street," "The Grinch Stole Christmas", etc,
- Our semi-Christian nation also tolerates some spiritual images of Christmas with its crèches and manger scenes and some older movies, like the claymation "Little Drummer Boy"
- But America less and less delights in the central issue of Christmas: the incarnation, the enfleshment of Almighty God... the physical birth of the Creator of the Universe

John MacArthur: "Lots of people who would otherwise gladly embrace Jesus as Messiah don't want Him to be God. They will welcome Him as the Son of David, but not as the Son of God. They don't mind celebrating the birth of a baby, but they don't want to hear about the Lord of Lords. They sing of His nativity, but brazenly reject His authority. They adore Him

At the core of Christmas is an INFINITE MYSTERY... and perhaps that is why people struggle so much to accept it. They stumble over the central stumbling stone to our intellect—that the baby in the manger was God. This mystery trips the circuit breakers of the mind... when too much electrical current flows in a wire, the wire becomes hot and

melts. So electricians in previous generations developed fuses, and put them in a fuse box. The fuse was designed to melt before the wires in the house did, protecting the house. Nowadays we have circuit breakers which trip off like a light switch whenever too much electrical current flows

So, if you try to attach four space heaters and a washing machine to one outlet, they will suck way too much current for the wires and the circuit breakers will trip

So it is, perhaps, with the mystery of Christmas—the incarnation of God, ***“the word became flesh and made His dwelling among us...”***

Ordinary human beings CANNOT ACCEPT this doctrine—that Jesus of Nazareth was fully God AND full man.

Charles Spurgeon:

As Jesus Christ is a child in his human nature, he is born, begotten of the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary. He is as truly-born, as certainly a child, as any other man that ever lived upon the face of the earth. He is thus in his humanity a child born. But as Jesus Christ is God’s Son, he is not born; but given, begotten of his Father from before all worlds, begotten — not made, being of the same substance with the Father. The doctrine of the eternal affiliation of Christ is to be received as an undoubted truth of our holy religion. But as to any explanation of it, no man should venture thereon, for it remaineth among the deep things of God — one of those solemn mysteries indeed, into which the angels dare not look, nor do they desire to pry into it — a mystery which we must not attempt to fathom, for it is utterly beyond the grasp of any finite being. As well might a gnat seek to drink in the ocean, as a finite creature to comprehend the Eternal God. A God whom we could understand would be no God. If we could grasp him he could not be infinite: if we could understand him, then were he not divine.

But we are not merely ordinary people, if we are Christians!! We have been made into NEW CREATURES and given the MIND OF CHRIST. And the best possible use of that new mind God has given us is to ponder the mysteries of Christ... beginning with His mysterious incarnation

I. The Foundational Miracle: The Incarnation

1 Timothy 3:16 Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body

A. The Mystery is Great

1. The apostle Paul was not given to exaggeration or extravagant statements
2. He was given to receiving and revealing incredibly deep things which he had received from the Lord
3. He had an extraordinary mind, and could reason things through with astonishing clarity and profundity
4. So great was his intellect that Festus thought his learning was driving him insane

Acts 26:24 At this point Festus interrupted Paul's defense. "You are out of your mind, Paul!" he shouted. "Your great learning is driving you insane."

5. The apostle Peter spoke of the complexity of some of Paul's letters

2 Peter 3:16 His letters contain some things that are hard to understand

6. God showed Paul "surpassingly great revelations of heaven itself... things that Paul could not even put into words

2 Corinthians 12:2-4 I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven. Whether it was in the body or out of the body I do not know-- God knows. ³ And I know that this man-- whether in the body or apart from the body I do not know, but God knows-- ⁴ was caught up to paradise. He heard inexpressible things, things that man is not permitted to tell.

7. YET... for all of this, Paul seemed to think the greatest mystery of all was the incarnation of God the Son... the enfleshment of the eternally begotten Son of God, through the virgin Mary

1 Timothy 3:16 Beyond all question, the mystery of godliness is great: He appeared in a body

B. J.I. Packer: This is the Foundational Miracle

1. His classic *Knowing God*... discusses the challenge Christian faith poses to "thoughtful people" around the world

- a. He says Christianity presents unbelievers with the challenge of accepting the doctrine of atonement: that the death of Jesus of Nazareth on a Roman cross two millennia ago can actually put away the world's sins
 - b. Or take the resurrection: how can we believe that Jesus rose from the dead physically? There has never been anything like it, and it is so unscientific as to be ludicrous, so the modern mind asserts
 - c. Or take the virgin birth: how can any serious-minded person accept such a biological anomaly?
 - d. Or what about the Gospel miracles? How do we accept the accounts of the feeding of the five thousand, or the stilling of the storm with a verbal command, or the opening of the eyes of a man born blind with spit and mud? Or the raising of a dead man after four days in the tomb?
2. But none of these compare with the real difficulty, the supreme mystery of all with which the gospel confronts us:

“It lies not in the Good Friday message of atonement, or the Easter message of resurrection, but in the Christmas message of Incarnation. The really staggering Christian claim is that Jesus of Nazareth was God made man—... so that Jesus of Nazareth was as truly and fully divine as he was human.

Here are two mysteries for the price of one—the plurality of persons within the unity of God, and the union of godhead and manhood in the person of Jesus. It is here, in the thing that happened at the first Christmas, that the profoundest and most unfathomable depths of the Christian revelation lie.”

“God became man, the divine Son became a Jew; the Almighty appeared on earth as a helpless human baby, unable to do more than lie and stare and wriggle and make noises, needing to be fed and changed and taught to talk like any other child. And there was no illusion or deception in this: the babyhood of the Son of God was a reality. The more you think about it, the more staggering it gets.” [*Knowing God*, p. 52-53]

C. So... Let's Stagger Our Minds on this Today!!

1. Let's ponder the imponderable
2. Let's consider the inconsiderable
3. Let's plumb the depths of an infinite mystery
4. Let's think, and think, and think some more...
5. Just as Mary did so many years ago... the first, perhaps, to ponder these thoughts

Luke 2:19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

II. The Facts of the Incarnation: Luke 1-2

A. Preparation for the Mystery: Luke 1

1. The Announcement to Mary

Luke 1:30-35 *the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 the house of Jacob 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 upon 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.*

2. The Pronouncement by Elizabeth

Luke 1:42-45 *In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!"*

3. The Magnificat of Mary

Luke 1:46-49 *And 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.*

B. The Orchestration of History: The Census

Luke 2:1-3 *In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register.*

1. God's sovereignty in directing the heart of Caesar
2. God's sovereignty in shaping Jewish culture so a trip to Bethlehem was necessary
3. Joseph wouldn't have presumed to travel to Bethlehem without this sovereign orchestration

C. Mary and Joseph Travel to Bethlehem

Luke 2:4-5 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

D. No Room in the Inn

Luke 2:7 there was no room for them in the inn.

E. Jesus is Born in a Stable and Laid in a Manger

Luke 2:6-7 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger

F. Shepherds Come to Worship

Luke 2:8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

1. An angel makes the announcement

Luke 2:9-12 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 of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

2. The heavenly host open themselves up in earthly worship

Luke 2:13-14 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

3. The shepherd take to heart the message... and GO SEE JESUS

Luke 2:15-16 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.

4. They tell Mary what the angel had said... and then spread the word

Luke 2:17-18 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.

5. They return glorifying God

Luke 2:20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

III. The Pondering Heart of Mary: Luke 2:19, 51

Luke 2:19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

Luke 2:51 But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

Spurgeon:

She wondered: she did more-she pondered. You will observe there was an exercise on the part of this blessed woman of the three great parts of her being; her memory-she kept all these things; her affections-she kept them in her heart; her intellect-she pondered them, considered them, weighed them, turned them over; so that memory, affection, and understanding, were all exercised about these things. We delight to see this in Mary, but we are not at all surprised when we recollect that she was in some sense the most concerned of all on earth, for it was of her that Jesus Christ had been born. Those who come nearest to Jesus and enter the most closely into fellowship with him, will be sure to be the most engrossed with him. Certain persons are best esteemed at a distance, but not the Savior; when you shall have known him to the very full, then shall you love him with the love which passeth knowledge; you shall comprehend the heights, and depths, and lengths, and breadths of his love; and when you shall do so, then your own love shall swell beyond all length and breadth, all height and depth. The birth most concerned Mary, and therefore she was the most impressed with it.

A. Mary Treasured

1. Twice it says that Mary treasured these things in her heart
 - a. To treasure means to store up something of immense value
 - b. The word actually gives a sense of PROTECTING something valuable, of guarding it
 - c. In this sin-cursed age, valuable things in this life have to be protected from harm

Moth and rust destroy and thieves break in and steal

2. What things did Mary treasure? How did she protect them?
 - a. The events surrounding Jesus' birth... and the significance of that birth!!
 - b. Even a natural birth is treasured by a mother
3. This is well-known to women who've experienced the joys of childbirth... you remember details years later that escaped the notice of your husband
 - a. The smell of the newborn's skin
 - b. The feel of their hair
 - c. Comments made by an attending nurse
 - d. The sounds the baby made when first nursing
 - e. The first time you heard your baby cry
 - f. The first time you swaddled your baby with a soft blanket
 - g. The first little outfit you dressed your baby in
 - h. All of these are NORMAL MATTERS... nothing supernatural here; just the normal details of a birth
 - i. There are approximately four babies born every second in the world!! 133 million births every year... nothing out of the ordinary
 - j. And yet I bet almost every mother TREASURES the details of those births
4. BUT Mary had far more than this to treasure and to protect in her mind
 - a. As she lay there, pain subsiding, Jesus sleeping in the manger, the shepherds having left, her mind was free at last to think
 - b. She remembered how it all began for her nine months ago... Gabriel's shocking and life-changing appearance
 - c. The depths of the message:
 - i) Son of David, reigning on David's throne forever
 - ii) Son of God... with no human father
 - iii) The Holy Spirit in power overshadowing her, knitting together the Son of God in her womb

- iv) The Savior of the world, the shepherds said... “Today, in the town of David, a Savior is born for you”
- v) A holy angel appearing, the glory of God shining, a heavenly host appearing, heavenly worship flowing
- d. As Mary lay there near the manger, she must have looked over at her firstborn son, sleeping peacefully
- e. And she PROTECTED those ideas, those precious memories
 - i) Protected them from loss: forgetfulness... she wanted to remember every little detail
 - ii) Protected them from corruption: knowing she was still a sinner, a humble maidservant of the Lord whom the Lord had elected to use for His mysterious purposes
 - iii) Protected her memories from trivializing conclusions... from thinking she could figure out the unsearchable mysteries of God
- f. In years to come, Mary would have to protect these treasured thoughts from all manner of Satanic attack
 - i) Her virtue would be openly questioned
 - ii) Her role would be openly attacked
 - iii) Satan would whisper evil insinuations in her mind
 - iv) As Jesus grew, she would have to review the facts again and again and remind herself
 - v) Faith comes from hearing... the words the angels spoke to her, to Joseph, to the shepherds gave her all the theological understanding she would need
 - vi) She would have to keep going back again and again to the facts of the case and protect them in her mind

B. Mary Pondered Them

1. The Greek word literally means to throw together
2. Mary was getting one idea to converse with another... one concept having a conversation with another in her mind

3. The best way to deal with the mysteries of God is to PONDER them, to meditate daily on them... to compare one passage with another, to lay one thought alongside another
4. So Mary almost certainly went again and again to the two basic facts: Son of Man, Son of God
 - a. This little baby is fully human... she could see his little chest rising and falling with each breath; she could feel his tiny little fingers curling around her index finger, feel him squeezing her finger with a tiny, frail, almost imperceptible strength; she knew he needed to nurse, to sleep, to grow... FULLY HUMAN
 - b. And yet, the Son of God... fully divine. What could that mean?

Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One

You shall worship no other gods...

- c. Was Mary to worship the Son of God?
 - d. When the shepherds came and worshiped, when the Magi came and worshiped, did Mary also worship her own little baby boy?
 - e. O the pondering, the quiet pondering that must have gone on inside the heart of this godly woman!!
5. And how it must have increased in mystery as the years went on
 - a. Jesus grew up into a twelve year old boy
 - b. The process is summarized in one sweeping verse that covers all Jesus' development from infancy to full manhood

Luke 2:52 Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

- c. Mary watched it all, pondered it all!!!
- d. She kept throwing these thoughts together in the quiet recesses of her heart, trying to plumb the infinite depths of the wisdom of God
- e. When Jesus was twelve, He was separated from Joseph and Mary and lost from them for three days; they finally found him in Jerusalem at the temple asking the priests such questions that they marveled at his understanding

Luke 2:48-51 When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." 49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked.

"Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he was saying to them.⁵¹ Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart.

6. So Mary's whole life was given to PROTECTING and PONDERING the events of Jesus' life
7. How much more, the events of His death
 - a. Simeon said "A sword will pierce your own soul"
 - b. That prophetic word was fulfilled as she watched her perfect Son die for the sins of the world
 - c. The blood that found its human origin in her humanity would flow for her sins
 - d. The head that she stroked in the manger would bleed with a crown of thorns
 - e. The hands that curled and uncurled involuntarily would willingly be pierced with nails to a wooden cross
 - f. And Mary certainly pondered these mysteries till the day she died
8. Mary was also an eyewitness of his resurrection as well
 - a. There in the upper room (Acts 1) waiting for the gift of the Holy Spirit
 - b. She has had a closer view of Christ's physical life than any other person in that room
 - c. When they sought to replace the traitor Judas in his apostolic office, they said...

Acts 1:21-22 it is necessary to choose one of the men who have been with us the whole time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us,²² beginning from John's baptism to the time when Jesus was taken up from us. For one of these must become a witness with us of his resurrection.

- d. Mary had seen far more than that!!!
- e. And she was treasuring and pondering those things until the day she was taken from her earthly life by death and received the glorification of her soul promised in the gospel

This was a whole life of pondering and treasuring the mysteries of the Incarnation

What about you?

IV. Application

Four holy works in this Nativity

A. Ponder and Treasure Christ in your Hearts Like Mary

1. The best way of dealing with the infinite mysteries of Christmas is to PROTECT them and PONDER them
2. Protect the Christmas message from its modern threats
 - a. Materialism
 - b. Busyness
 - c. False doctrine
 - d. Apathy
3. Ponder the Christmas message to its depths
 - a. Son of Man
 - b. Son of God
 - c. Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man
4. Never lose your sense of amazement at the incarnation, the central mystery of the Christian faith

B. Pursue Christ as the Shepherds Did

Luke 2:15-16 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.

1. Responsibility we have to exhort one another
2. Responsibility we have to keep pursuing Christ in our hearts
3. "Seek the Lord while He is found..."
4. GO LOOK FOR HIM

Jeremiah 29:13 You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.

C. Worship Christ

1. Let your pondering give way to worship

2. This is the proper heart reaction... be amazed, be filled with wonder, be moved deeply
 3. Let your affections melt
 4. Fall down on your knees and worship worship worship
- D. Spread the Story Abroad: As the Shepherds Did

Luke 2:17-18 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.