

“Cradle, Cross, Crown”

Date: December 24, 2016

Place: Lakewood UMC

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Theme: Remarkable gift

Occasion: Christmas Eve, Max Lucado series

During the season of Advent, we've been reading Max Lucado's book "*Because of Bethlehem, Love is Born, Hope is Here.*" In the tenth chapter he tells the story of a Christmas long ago, when his Dad gave his Mom an extraordinary gift.

The large box arrived shortly after Thanksgiving. It sat by the Christmas tree for four weeks. It had no name on it, no shiny wrapping paper. It was taped shut. And it was a mystery.

Come Christmas, all of the other gifts had been opened and the kids were scurrying around playing with their new toys, when Mom noticed the still unopened gorilla of a box. It was huge; at least to four year old Max. Mom turned to Dad and asked if he was going to open his gift. He got one of those silly grins on his face, like he was keeping a secret, which he was. The box was for Mom.

She pulled the tape off and the box was filled with nothing but tissue paper, so she thought. She pulled out one armful after another. Finally, she strikes pay dirt: another box. She opens it, only to find another box, and then another box within that box. A couple more times, until she finally reaches the smallest of boxes.

A ring box. My brother and I shout, "Open it, Mom." She smiles at the 8-millimeter camera that had been recording her the whole time. "Jack," she says.

Max remembers, "I didn't understand the romantic significance of a new ring. But I did learn a lesson: a remarkable gift can arrive in

an unremarkable package. One did in the Lucado house. One did in Bethlehem, too.”

No one expected God to come the way he did. Yet the way he came was every bit as important as the coming itself. The manger is the message. At least this was the opinion of the apostle Paul. We don't often hear Paul's name mentioned in Christmas reflections.

We typically think of Joseph, Mary, the shepherds and the angels. And yet, Paul gives us the most eloquent summary of the Bethlehem promise. The *descended* Christ is now the *ascended* Christ, and he reigns over us. Listen to what Paul says in Philippians 2:5-11:

“In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus, who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his advantage.

Rather, he made himself nothing, by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death, even death on a cross!

Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and under the earth, and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Jesus was in very nature, God. Before Bethlehem, Jesus had every advantage and benefit of deity. He was boundless, timeless, and limitless. “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made.” (John 1:3)

Every rock, tree, and planet needs a stamp that says, “Made by Jesus.” Jesus spoke and the universe burst forth, with all of its billions of stars and millions of galaxies. He calls each star by name.

But we don't know Jesus as "Christ the Creator," we know him as "Christ the Incarnate One." The One who made everything, "made himself nothing." Christ made himself small. He made himself dependent upon lungs, a larynx and legs.

He experienced hunger and thirst. He went through all the developmental stages that your own children do. He was taught to stand, to walk, to wash his face and to dress himself. His muscles grew stronger, his hair grew longer, and his voice cracked when he went through puberty. He was genuinely human.

Jesus took "the very nature of a servant." He became like us so he could serve us. He entered our world, not to demand our allegiance but to display his affection.

He didn't view his equality with God as something to be grasped. He gave away his divine advantage. When people mocked him, he didn't turn them into stones. When soldiers spat on him, he didn't boomerang their spit.

When people called him crazy, he didn't strike them blind. Just the opposite. He absorbed their ridicule and he became obedient to death, even death on a cross. God was on that cross. God took the nails. God took the whips. God bore the shame. God felt the tip of the spear. God exhaled a final breath.

Christ came down, to lift us up. Down, down, down. From Heaven's crown, to Bethlehem's cradle, to Jerusalem's cross. It was one thing for Christ to enter a womb, quite another for him to be placed in tomb.

But the tomb could not hold him. "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name."

The One who went low is now made high. The One who descended is now exalted. Jesus is promoted to the “highest place.” He occupies the only true throne in the universe. Every other throne is made of paper-mache and is doomed to pass.

Not the throne of Jesus. “God gave him the name that is above every name.” There are people on our planet who mock the name of Jesus. They scoff at the idea of God on earth. They renounce their need for a Savior. They are self-sufficient, independent and self-reliant.

But a day is coming when they will bow in the presence of Christ. One ruler after another will step forward. Crowns will be collected at the foot of Jesus. No one will boast in his presence. All the money in the world will be shown to be counterfeit. Nothing will matter. No one will matter. Just Jesus. His name will be exalted.

We gather tonight to worship the birth of the world’s Savior. Bow before him. Humble yourself before the One who humbled himself for you.

And to think, it all began in the most inconspicuous of places – a hay box in Bethlehem. Amen.

This sermon borrows heavily from the book *Because of Heaven – Love is Born, Hope is Here*, by Max Lucado. Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2016, pp. 107-116.