

## Not What We Expected

### Do I Need a Savior?

Luke 2:8-11

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I recently went to the dermatologist for my annual check-up. The doctor looked at something on my lip and said, "Hmmm...that's new." (You never want to hear those words from your doctor.) He said, "Let's take a biopsy of that. We'll get back to you with the results in about ten days."

Well...that certainly got my attention. And so, I began everyone's favorite part of medical care: waiting. Ten days came and went. No word. It kind of slipped my mind until I was driving one day and got a call. (Hands free, of course!) "Is this Mark Toone?" "Yes it is." "This is Renee from the dermatologist's office." "Yes, I've been expecting your call." "You recently had a biopsy on your lip." "Yes." "We promised we would get back to you with the results." "Yes you did." "Well... I wanted to give you a call and share with you what we discovered."

(OK...at this point...I feel my blood pressure starting to rise. She continues) "You had what we call a sebaceous hyperplasia... an abnormal enlargement of a sebaceous gland...." (OK...NOW I feel my heart pounding...) "And (she continued) ...it is... benign."

I've forgotten the rest of what she said. But I'd like to write a different script for how to give news like that. It goes something like this. "Hi, this is Renee from the doctor's office. It's benign!" Right? Get to the point. There are some announcements that don't require details. You just want the punch line. "It's a girl. It's a boy. It's benign!" Boom! Give me the headline first!

In journalism, this is called "burying the lead." Sticking the headline down in the third paragraph!

I think the Christmas angels buried the lead that night. They appear to groggy shepherds in the middle of the night in a brilliant blast of light. THEN come's a loud voice from the heavens. And here's what they heard... and I'm using my best angel voice:

"Fear not... (that's every angel's opening line, by the way... and it's always wasted breath. They are always terrified!) Fear not for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people... (This is very angel-like and great for Christmas pageants but not so great if you're the shepherd that's shaking in his sandals!!!) For unto you is born this day in the city of David. A SAVIOR!!!!!!"

There it is. There's the headline. It's a girl. It's a boy. It's benign... It's a savior! THAT is the unexpected headline of Christmas. Born to you... THIS day... is a Savior."

A savior who is Christ the Lord. "Christ" is Greek for "Messiah" which means "Anointed one." The Old Testament of the Bible was full of promises that, one day, God would send a Messiah; a God-sent Savior who would rescue his people from the cruelty of the world. But those predictions had been made hundreds of years earlier... and so far... Messiah was a no-show. Until he wasn't. "Born to you... this day... is a Savior."

And God knows they needed saving. The Romans were cruel tyrants. The Jews lived under occupation by an empire of unbelievers who disrespected their religion, controlled their lives, taxed them mercilessly (sounds like Washington state!) The Jews needed saving - they KNEW they needed saving - and finally... that salvation came...in a very unexpected package. "Born to you...THIS day...is a Savior."

Have you ever needed saving? I mean, literally needed saving? I asked that question of some of our members. I was amazed by the replies: "I was dangling 30 feet above a rock ledge with my backpack wedged in a crevice when my friend pulled me up." "A stranger saved me from drowning, pulling me, unconscious, out of the water and onto the beach." "My mom's friend gave me the Heimlich and out popped a gob-stopper from my totally blocked throat when I was 12." That was just a few of the many responses I received.

I have my own life-saving story. I fell on my head back in 2003 while ice skating in Sun Valley. I lay unconscious on the ice and had to be airlifted to a hospital. People I don't even remember came to my aid as I lay there bleeding and in a coma. Which is a good thing because I needed saving!

So, how about you... have you ever needed saving?

There's not been a year in recent memory when people were more aware that they needed saving than 2020. Especially in the U.S. We are a self-sufficient people. It's what defines us. We take care of ourselves. We take care of our

own. But this is the first time in decades that even we self-sufficient, pull-yourself-up-by-your bootstraps Americans would admit that we need saving. And not just from a pandemic, although that's brought us to our knees. But from racial unrest. From violence. From incivility. From anarchy. From bitter political divisions that are tearing us apart.

And even more critically, we need saving from the ugliness this year has revealed within us: selfishness, hatred fear, desperation, depression. Have you felt any of those things this year? Of course you have. What is the vaccine for those viruses? What is the therapeutic for selfishness...or hatred...or greed? If ever self-sufficient Americans were aware that they needed saving it is now. Would you agree?

2020 taught us a lot of things, including new phrases...like "Socially Distant." We must stay at least six feet away from people in order to be safe. In order to keep THEM safe... in order to be kept safe FROM them. We will have 10 Christmas Eve services over two nights because we are told we cannot have safely more than 200 people in this huge room.

But the most amazing thing about the **first** Christmas is... it was NOT socially distant. In fact, the whole POINT of Christmas was that the Son of God came close to us in order to save us. One of his name, Emmanuel, means, "God With Us!" Jesus came close to us... and it put him at risk. There is a dangerous undertone to the Christmas story. Jealous King Herod is threatened by the birth of this child-King. He orders the slaughter of all baby boys in Bethlehem to eliminate that threat. The holy family flees to save the child's life! Because Jesus refused to remain socially distant, it put him at risk from the first moments of his earthly life. But he was our savior and he couldn't save us from a distance.

A few weeks ago, you might have seen a remarkable video. 74-year-old Richard Willbanks was walking his puppy, Gunner, when suddenly, an alligator shot out from a nearby pond, grabbed Gunner and dragged him back in to his apparent demise until this happened. (Video shows Gunner being saved!)

I love the fact that Richard never even dropped his cigar from his mouth! I don't know how much time he spent reflecting on his actions. If he had... if he'd considered the possibility that big brother gator might be hanging around nearby... he might have thought twice about jumping in. But Richard loved that puppy and threw himself into that titanic wrestling match. Setting aside his own safety and comfort, he dove right into the danger in order to save his little friend.

That is the story of Christmas. God sent his son from a place of perfect safety... perfect social distance from the sinfulness of this world. Jesus left his holy quarantine and came into our mess. And He didn't just tiptoe in... he dove right in. He suffered with us... ultimately, giving up his own life on the cross in order to save us. To rescue us. And when Jesus was raised from death to life, he declared his triumph over every evil, every ill, every virus, every curse with which we contend.

Christmas is more than a sweet story about a beleaguered couple giving birth to a baby on a long road trip. It is the story of a Savior. So may I ask this... do **you** need saving? You do, by the way. Everyone does. The only question is are you ready to admit it yet? Has this year finally convinced you that there are dangerous and evil things around you from which you must be saved? Even more, has this year made you aware of the dangerous and evil things WITHIN YOU... the selfishness... greed... indifference... fear... bigotry... from which you need to be saved?

No vaccine can do that. No therapeutic. But the Savior can. The good news of Christmas is... our savior has come! And if you are ready to admit you need a rescue...he is ready to save you ...right now.