

**+ Hebrews 1:1-9 + Theme: Focus on Christ This Christmas!¹ +
+ Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord: Christmas Day + 25 December 2016 +**

Have you ever been outside on a cold winter night, someplace far away from the city lights? The night sky was clear. You looked up at the stars and thought, “Wow!” The Milky Way splashed across the sky. Shooting stars blazed through the darkness. You could even see satellites making their cold and lonely orbit. Do you ever look up and marvel at what’s out there?

Sadly, that’s a rather infrequent occurrence these days. We don’t spend enough time looking up. We spend far more time looking down at things like our phones, than gazing at the stars. Yet even if we did, seeing something doesn’t always guarantee that we are seeing it as it really is. For example, think of the shepherds that we hear about in Luke 2. They lived out in the fields. They kept watch over their flocks at night. They saw the stars every single night, but did they understand them?

You see, in ancient times, when people looked up at the night sky, they noticed that some of the stars were different. Night after night you could watch the stars and see where they were in the sky, but a few of those stars moved differently. Most of the stars moved in a predictable way across the seasonal skies, but there were five stars that did not. The ancient Greeks called them “wanderers” or πλανήτης—planets. The Greeks thought they were seeing stars that wandered around among the others, when in reality, they were missing the fact that the planets actually orbited the sun. Focusing on the wrong details, the ancient Greeks missed what was really happening.

Sometimes you and I and others can be like those well-intentioned, but misunderstanding Greeks, especially when it comes to hearing the familiar account of Christ’s birth at Christmas. We hear the story, but focus on the wrong details. In fact, it’s easy to get caught up in the details. You could focus on the improbable path that God provided for the child to be born. You could focus on the poor, weary couple traveling during the last month of Mary’s pregnancy obeying Roman law, while escaping the gossips back home in Nazareth. You could focus on the exhausting search for a place to stay in Bethlehem that resulted in a birth taking place in a cave doubling as a stable. You could focus on the terror of the shepherds or the glorious angels or the eager running of the shepherds to the manger-bed of the Christ Child.

Perhaps it’s not so much focusing on one particular detail of that account, but rather focusing on the wrong details like when the main point of the Christmas story becomes how precious or heartwarming it is. “Look! Mary and Joseph and a donkey and a stable. See how she laid him on a bed of hay in a manger? Oh, and all the animals are watching...It’s just so precious!”

Let’s pause for a moment and ask ourselves a few questions. Of all the busy preparations you made for Christmas, how many of them were spiritual? Have we started to see Christmas the way the rest of the world does—a time set aside to celebrate family, gifts, and the hope for peace on earth? Has Christmas become a day that’s all about the children or is it about the Child who changed everything? You see, if Christmas is not all about that one Child, then we are no different than those ancient Greeks staring up at the wandering stars. We’re focusing on the wrong details and missing the point.

Christmas is the day when God entered into this world as one of us to save humanity, to save you and me from ourselves. You can’t see that by simply looking at a young woman giving birth in a barn. No, the true nature of Christmas, the truth of Christmas has to be told to us. Someone has to tell us that the child just born is the Child who came to change our world.

When I was a kid, I loved looking up at the night sky and seeing all the stars and constellations and planets. I even dreamed that I could be an astronaut and a pastor at the same time. One Christmas when I was about 7-8 years old, I received books on astronomy with beautiful maps of the stars and pictures of what was really up there in the heavens. I also received a telescope. With the telescope, I could see details on the moon and a sharper view of the stars and planets in the sky. The astronomy books explained what I was seeing.

In a similar sense, God provides in his Word both a telescope and a guide to help you focus on the Christ Child. The writer of Hebrews tells us, **“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways...”** After our first parents fell into sin, the Lord graciously gave them the first promise of a Savior, **“I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers. He will crush your head and you will strike his heel.”** (Genesis 3:15) That was the first detail, the first glimpse of the

¹ Some of the thoughts and language of this sermon were received with thanks from Pr. Jon Schroeder.

Savior to come, but the Lord provided more and more details as time went on. Early on, God revealed them directly to people like Abraham and Jacob, but soon he began to use the prophets—proclaimers of his Word who revealed God’s will to God’s people, proclaimers like Nathan and Isaiah and Jeremiah and Micah and Malachi. With every new prophecy, the Lord sharpened and clarified the focus of his people on the coming Christ.

Yet when the time came for all of that prophecy and preparation to finally come into complete focus, to finally become reality, only a few people knew it was happening. An elderly couple named Zechariah and Elizabeth were blessed with the miraculous gift of a son in their old age, a son who had a very specific mission and purpose—to prepare the way for the coming Christ. Then there was a young virgin named Mary, who was informed that she would miraculously be the mother of the Son of God, while her husband-to-be, Joseph, was brought up to speed on what the Lord was about to accomplish. Then on the night the child was actually born, a nameless group of shepherds outside of Bethlehem were informed of the Messiah’s birth.

While the prophets had sharpened and clarified the picture of the coming Christ, the Lord used his ministering messengers—the angels—to tell those people what they were seeing, to give those people the most up-to-the-minute information on how God was accomplishing his purpose. The angel Gabriel announced to both Zechariah and Mary that they would have miraculous births. Another angel spoke to Joseph in a dream, as did an angel who announced the Savior’s birth to the Bethlehem shepherds followed by a sky-full of the angel hosts of heaven singing glorious praises to God himself.

The prophets and the angels were and are absolutely necessary for God’s people to find out what Christmas is all about, but don’t focus on the prophets and the angels! To do so would be like focusing on the telescope and the astronomy books rather than the stars and planets in the heavens. You and I would again be no different than the misunderstanding Greeks.

When the writer of the book of Hebrews penned the text before us, he was writing to people who were having a difficult time focusing on Christ. They were focusing on the prophets and their messages. They were focusing on the angels in all their glorious power. They were focusing on all the trappings of the worship life of Old Testament Jews—the temple and the Sabbath and the sacrifices and the priests. That’s why the entire book of Hebrews tries to focus on what Christmas is all about—not to mention Epiphany and Lent and Easter and every day in the life of God’s people.

To people like you and me, who tend to focus on everything, except what Christmas is really all about, the writer explains, ***“In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.”***

Framed by the prophets pointing to Christ and the angels proclaiming Christ, focus on Christ. Be impressed by all the care God took in preparing the way for the Savior to come, but don’t let it distract you from why he did it. Be impressed by the glorious power of the angel hosts praising God and proclaiming peace to mankind, but don’t let them distract you from what they are actually proclaiming. Focus on the Child whose tiny hand his mother holds in the quiet before the shepherds arrive. Focus on the Child of promise, the Son of God, the Prince of Peace swaddled and resting in Joseph’s arms.

Focus on the Child who is truly God, who truly deserves his glory, who is the Word that gave life to all creation, and who sustains all things by his powerful Word. Focus on the Child who will be your Substitute, who will show how deep and wide and high and long the love of God is for those who love him not, whose sinless life will end on a cross and yet provide purification for all your sins—even for those times when you have completely missed Jesus when he was right in front of you. Focus on the Child, who is not only your Savior, but also your King who guides all things for your eternal good, who is your hope for eternal glory, and whose reign will never end.

Focus on Christ this Christmas, and then be like the shepherds, who ***“spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child.”*** (Luke 2:17) People around us hang up lights and wrap presents and give gifts. Yet if that’s all they see in Christmas, they miss out on the truth—unless you tell them, unless you show them that in Christ, the hope of all the ages has come. ***“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”*** (John 1:14) ***“Today in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you. He is Christ the Lord.”*** (Luke 2:11)

We have seen that glory promised by prophets and proclaimed by angels. Now it is our calling from God to tell that message to our world. That's a message for people who cannot see that Christmas is about more than just the trappings and the decorations and the manger and the animals and the angels and the shepherds and even Mary and Joseph. Focus them on what the whole world is missing. Focus them on Christ this Christmas! Amen.