

# A HANDS-UP CHRISTMAS

## LUKE 2:1-20

And it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child.

So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid.

Then the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be the sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

So it was, when the angels had gone away from them into heaven, that the shepherds said to one another, "Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us." And they came with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the Babe lying in a manger.

Now when they had seen Him, they made widely known the saying which was told them concerning this Child. And all those who heard it marveled at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things and pondered them in her heart. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told them.

In 2016 a man wearing a red shirt, and a Santa Claus mask walked into a credit union in Memphis, Tennessee. He passed out candy canes to several of the customers, before he handed a note to the teller at the counter, demanding all the money in her drawer.

It was a Christmas Eve stick-up!

Once the man had the loot he dashed out of the building. The naughty Santa has yet to be caught.

This also happened in 2009 at a SunTrust Bank in Nashville, Tennessee. A Santa Claus walked into the bank, waved a handgun, and demanded money.

*This time the thief went all out with his costume... He wore a full Santa suit - had a white beard - a red hat - and a red, fur-lined coat and pants with white trim. You might have expected Santa Claus' get-away vehicle to be a reindeer-pulled sleigh, instead try a gray sedan.*

This particular Santa commented to the customers in the bank he was stealing the money *to pay his elves.*

It's safe to say, bank robbers impersonating Kris Kringle are going to give the jolly ole fellow a bad name. You expect a Santa Claus to say, *"What do you want for Christmas, little fellow?"* NOT *"Stick'em up!"*

But for the customers and tellers in these two burglarized banks their Christmas was **a hands-up Christmas...** *as was the first Christmas celebration...*

I'm not suggesting anyone was robbed in Bethlehem! The angelic host didn't burst into the shepherds' fields, and shout, *"Get your hands in the air, this is a hold up!"* None of the shepherds were told to *"Stick'em up!"*

But that was the reaction of everyone that witnessed God's miracle that first Christmas. In a very real sense almost all the Christmas characters lifted their hands to the heavens. Everyone surrendered to the will of God!

They were overwhelmed with wonder and awe, praise and worship. They were *arrested* by God's glory.

No one who participated in the original Christmas celebration was the least bit concerned about, *“What they wanted for Christmas that year?”* Instead, everyone was stunned by what *God had done!*

It’s interesting that when human beings get excited, *when they get either thrilled or scared*, their instinctive reaction is to thrust their hands up into the air...

When our emotions *erupt* - our arms tend to *go up*.

The signal for a touchdown in football, or a made field goal, or a three-pointer in basketball is two hands over an official’s head... The reflex of a runner stretching across the finish line is to throw his arms into the air... A baseball player who hits a homer will often raise his arm upward. This is also the umpire’s signal...

**Hands-Up** is our instinctive reaction to a triumph!

And when a guy dressed in a Santa Claus suit sticks the nose of a gun in your face... you get real excited, and in response, *what do you do?* Obviously, you stick your arms and hands straight up into the air.

A **hands-up posture** is a universal sign of **surprise** and **surrender**. And this is why I say, Christmas needs to be celebrated **hands-up!** For Christmas is all about *God’s biggest surprise* and *our deepest surrender*.

1 Timothy 2:8 is the verse I almost used as my text this morning. Paul writes to his sidekick Timothy, *“Therefore I desire that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands,*

without wrath and doubting...” And that should especially be the case at Christmas time.

People everywhere should get their **hands-up** for Christmas. The story of that first Christmas should have an uplifting effect on our hearts, minds, emotions, *even our hands*. The proper response to Christmas is wonder, and worship, and surrender, and **joy!**

I’ve heard it said, “**The opposite of joy isn’t sorrow, but unbelief.**” If there’s no joy in your heart today it means your faith isn’t focused on the truth of the Christmas message. The first words out the angels’ mouths were, “**Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all people.**”

And this is still God’s offer to believing hearts at the Christmas season... Believe the Savior has come and God will fill your heart with “*good tidings of great joy.*”

This “*great joy*” is the reason *singing* and *Christmas* go together. *What other time of the year do we sit with friends around a piano, and sing seasonal songs?*

It doesn’t happen at New Years, or Thanksgiving, or the 4th of July - not even at Easter - but Christmas has its own music. Christmas songs have their own special designation, called, “**carols.**” At Christmas the heart that understands is always on the verge of a song. It’s a time to sing, and shout, and marvel, and praise!

We even take our singing on the road, *when we go [caroling](#)*. Several weeks ago, Calvary Chapel went caroling into some of the surrounding neighborhoods.

*Apparently, it wasn't my group - I think it was the High Schoolers* - the next day, one of the neighbors to whom they sang responded by sending the church a donation. It must've been quite a rendition of "[Joy To The World](#)." Our caroling prompted their *thanksgiving!*

My group also had a memorable moment. Vernon's little girl caught her scarf on fire with her candle, and we almost burned down a front porch. Nick and Larry were quick to get their **hands up** and put out the blaze.

But here's the proper Christmas posture for us all...

We should lift up our heart, and our voice, and our minds, and *even our hands* to God in response to the marvelous gift of His Son and our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Author Jan Richardson writes of Christmas, "[The season of Christmas means there is something on the horizon the likes of which we have never seen before.](#)

[But what is possible is to not see it - to miss it, to turn just as it brushes past you... And you begin to grasp what it was you missed, like Moses in the cleft of the rock, watching God's \(backside\) fade in the distance...](#)

[So stay. Sit. Linger. Tarry. Ponder. Wait. Behold. Wonder. There will be time enough for running - for rushing - for worrying - for pushing. For now, stay - wait. Something is on the horizon.](#)" Christmas teaches us that when we least expect it, God may be up to something really, really good. And if we

don't want to miss it, we should slow down, and listen, and ponder...

As we've discussed the last three weeks, at Christmas we need to be **hands-on** practically involved with others - **hands-off** the materialism the season can breed - and graciously **hands-out** to folks around us.

But Christmas is also a time to be **hands-up** in worship... to surrender our thoughts and will to God.

Here's what I want you to think about over the next two days leading up to Christmas... I want you to ponder and marvel at **the majesty of Christmas... the mystery of Christmas... the mercy of Christmas...**

And if you do, it'll get your **hands up** this Christmas!

First, Christmas is full of **majesty**. Christmas is a kingly, royal event in the history of the world.

Think of it, *His Majesty King Jesus*, was born.

Last week, I saw where Britain's royal family released their 2018 Christmas cards... Here's Will, Kate, and the kids in their bluejeans - while Harry and Megan are checking out the fireworks... Even today Christmas and royalty go together - and it should, for that's what *the first Christmas was all about...*

In Luke 2:11, the angel told the shepherds, "**There is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.**" This word "**Christ**" has a rich history.

Our English word is a derivative of the Greek word “Christos” which is a translation of the Hebrew term “Messiah” - which means “the anointed One.”

When a Hebrew was chosen for the throne of Israel a priest or prophet would bring a ram’s horn sloshing over with olive oil, and pour it over the person’s head.

This was the king’s anointing. Throughout the Bible, oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. And his royal anointing signified he was God’s choice to be king.

When David was chosen king of Israel he was an unlikely choice. He was the runt of Jesse’s litter... His older brothers seem to be much better candidates.

Yet God had instructed the prophet Samuel, “The LORD does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”

God chose David because of his **hidden qualities**.

David had a heart for God, and a sensitivity toward spiritual things. He was a man God could trust. 1 Samuel 16:13 tells us, “Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers; and the Spirit of the LORD came upon David from that day forward.”

God later made incredible promises to David that I’m sure David found difficult to grasp. God predicted an eternal king would rise from David’s family, sit on an everlasting throne, and rule a kingdom that has no end.

And through the ages the Hebrew people called this coming king: *the Anointed One*, or *Messiah*, or *Christ*...



Listen to what the angel said to Mary when he told her she would have a child, “He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.” Obviously, Jesus was the promised king the prophets had predicted would save and rule God’s people. That’s why Christmas is about *the anointing of majesty, and coming of a king...*

I think this is where Americans have a hard time with the Christmas story. We have a **president**, *not a king*.

The idea of royalty is not in our DNA. We vote a president into office, and if we don’t like him we vote him out in short order. In contrast, a king reigns for life.

In a sense, American revolutions occur every four *or* eight years... **but a king requires true submission.**

There’s a man in Dayton, Nevada that sums up the American spirit. His name is Kevin Baugh, but he prefers you call him, “**His Excellency.**” Kevin rules his own country. He wears a uniform with six large medals, a gold rope over his shoulder, and a general’s cap.

A flag flaps over his 1.3 acre nation. His neighbors call it “**his yard.**” Kevin says he has his own **space program**, *a model rocket...* his own **currency**, *tied to the value of chocolate-chip cookies...* a **national sport**, broomball... and a **navy**, consisting of an inflatable raft.

Kevin Baugh refers to himself as a **micro-nationalist**. As he puts it, he rules over “**the kingdom of me.**”

Though hopefully none of us fly our own flag, I would suggest that at heart, we all are micro-nationalists. We all rule over “the kingdom of me.” This is why you need to ponder and consider this Christmas... **His majesty.**

Christmas is about the coming of a king - and *He* is not *me*. “Born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord...” Later the Bible calls Jesus, “King of kings.” Jesus is a **macro-nationalist.**

He is the one and only ultimate ruler. And if you persist in trying to run and control your own little kingdom you’ll end up in trouble with God. There is a throne in every human heart - and it’s a single-seater!

Friends, this is why we need to get our **hands-up** this Christmas, and surrender control of our lives to the only King, Jesus... Over the next few days, I hope you’ll seriously ponder **the majesty of Christmas.**

But let’s also praise God for the **mystery** of Christmas. The angel told the shepherds a king had been born, “**Christ the Lord.**” And they were given an astonishing sign to identify this king, “**You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.**”

This king of the universe came to earth as *a bundled baby*. This is a mind-boggling mystery - the Almighty God, the King of kings, became a helpless baby.

In the days following WW2, Winston Churchill was baffled in his attempts to decipher Russian politics.

The inner-workings of the Russian hierarchy were a mystery to Churchill. He famously referred to Russia as “a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma.”

And this description can also be used for the coming of the Messiah. We use the term “Incarnation...” it’s an interesting word. It’s from the Latin term, “*incarne*” which means “*in the flesh*” or “*in bodily form.*”

When you go to the supermarket to buy chili you have two choices: *regular chili* or *chili con carne*...

*Carne* and *incarnation* are the same word - *chili con carne* is *chili with meat*... And I hope you know your pastor always reaches for the manly chili - no sissy chili for me. I want a bowl of the manly, meaty chili.

Well, Jesus was **God con carne** or **God with meat**.

The Bible teaches us God is Spirit. From eternity past to eternity future God exists as Spirit, yet when God came to earth He was packaged as meat. Jesus was God - the divine spirit - but He was spirit clothed in meat - muscle, ligaments, skin, bone, hair, and teeth!

When the King of the universe joined the ranks of humanity, He came as one of its weakest members.

He reigned not from a throne, but from a bassinet.

George MacDonald writes, “They were looking for a King to slay their foes and lift them high. You came as a little baby thing that made a woman cry.” Imagine, the God who fills the heavens, *a little baby thing*...

Did you hear about the first grade class that decided to have their own Christmas pageant? They took the biblical story and updated it as only first graders can.

All the traditional characters were included in the story - but when it came time for the baby to be born a doctor in a white coat, carrying a black bag, entered the picture to attend to Mary. He went behind some bales of straw to assist the mother and her newborn.

When he emerged he had a smile on his face.

That's when the doctor announced to the animals and the on-lookers, "I've got good news... *it's a God!*" That could also have been said that first Christmas!

But it wasn't just **a God** in the manger - it was ***the God!*** *It was the one true God!* "It's not that someone became God - it's that God became someone." God became a real flesh, and blood, and bone human.

The Christmas mystery isn't about an enlightened humanity rising to the level of deity. It's about the holy God lowering Himself to the level of a human being.

Christmas is about *God stooping down* - not *man standing up*. The king occupied a crib. It was the ultimate example of humility. Never in the course of human history, has anyone so *high* descend so *low*.

And it was all such a mystery... in what and how it happened. *What was God thinking? How did He do it?*

What was it like for an omniscient God to be reduced to the vocabulary and intellect of a baby? For the God who knows all languages to only coo?... What was it like for the

omnipotent God, who can do all things, to be unable to feed Himself, or control His own bladder?

God put Himself in the most humbling predicament.

With nine grandkids in the last seven years I've had some baby time. I like to put them on my shoulders and let them grab my hair with their little fingers. I stand them on the countertop and watch them wobble.

This week I had some Mabel time. She's the newest grandchild, just a couple of weeks old. I was enamored with the tininess of her feet. You forget how small and fragile humans are when they first enter the world.

Yet that's how God chose to make His entrance into the world He created - *as a tiny baby*. He could've come as a mighty warrior, riding a fiery chariot... *a spectacle*. Instead, He came almost incognito.

One author writes, "The high and lofty One made low and helpless. The One who inhabits eternity comes to dwell in time. The One, who none can look upon and live, is delivered in a stable under the soft, indifferent gaze of cattle. The Father of all mercies puts Himself at our mercy." What an amazing thought. Over the next few days why don't you think and ponder about [the mystery of Christmas](#). It will surely get your **hands up!**

And finally we should give thought to the **mercy** behind the Christmas story. This is what caused the angels to reach a crescendo! Verse 13, "**And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying:**

"Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!"

Christmas is all about God's merciful peace and goodwill. At the first Christmas God was glorified in heaven. And on earth, peace and goodwill were made possible for every human heart who believes.

*I won't ask for a show of hands, but how many of you have ever occupied a jail cell? Have you ever spent the night incarcerated? Or spent a weekend behind bars?*

Once, a prisoner described the helplessness of the experience, "You wait and wait, and bide your time, behind a bolted door... realizing your only hope for freedom is for that door to be opened from the outside." That's a description of Christmas mercy.

Mankind was trapped in a prison called sin. It's a cell you can't open from the inside. There's no way to set yourself free. Only God could open the door from His side of the lock... *None of us can save ourselves.*

Christmas is an invasion. Here's the glad tidings of Christmas in a nutshell... **God turned the knob.**

One author I read communicates a profound thought, "Once you see God in a stable, you can never be sure where He will appear, or to what lengths He will go *in* His wild pursuit of man. If the holiness of God were present in this least auspicious of all events, this birth of a peasant's child; then there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that His holiness can be present there too. Always remember, just

where God seems most helpless, there He is most strong - and just where we least expect Him, He comes most fully.”

Christmas is all about God’s mercy. It reveals His unwillingness to let **our sin** stand in **His way**. As stated, Christmas is about God’s “wild pursuit of man.”

It takes more than a sense of obligation to drive a person to such a *wild pursuit*. **Please don’t miss this point...** It was a burning love - a relentless mercy - that moved God to journey *from heaven to a manger... on to a cross... and through the ages... and to your heart.*

Imagine God’s throne, and before it stands a throng of people from every tribe and nation - billions of people awaiting God’s judgment... Near the front of the crowd there’s a large group that’s obviously angry...

One man screams, *“How can God judge us? What could He know about the suffering we’ve endured?”*

A lady in the group rolls up her shirtsleeve, and reveals the tattooed number she received in a Nazi concentration camp. She cries out, *“We were uprooted and abused - tortured, and beaten, and executed.”*

A black man lowers the collar of his shirt, and shows the ugly rope burn around his neck. *“What about this? I was lynched for no other reason than being black!...”*

Another man chimes in, *“We suffocated on slave ships. We were torn from our families. We’ve toiled until death was a welcomed release.”* All across the plain are thousands of people - each with their own complaint about the evil God allowed into His world....

And the common refrain is heard over and over again, “What does God know about suffering? He lives in heaven where there’s no weeping, and fear, and pain, and hunger, and hatred! God lives a sheltered life... what right does He have to judge us humans?”

All across the plain each group chose a leader - the person who’d suffered the most intensely... *There was a Jew, a black man, a Native American, an illegitimate child, an untouchable from India, a sweatshop worker, a victim from Hiroshima, an inmate from a Siberian prison camp, and a woman victimized by “Me Too”...*

They came together, and they prepared their case against God! They concluded, *“God can judge us, only after He has suffered what we have endured.”*

They figured God had to be sentenced to live on earth - *as a man!* But because He was God, the delegation set certain boundaries that would keep Him from using His divine powers to temper His suffering...

*Let Him be born a Jew...*

*Let the legitimacy of His birth be doubted, and His parentage questioned...*

*Let Him champion a cause so just, yet so radical, that it would bring on Him hate and condemnation - and cause the powers-that-be to plot His murder...*

*Let Him be betrayed by His closest friends...*

*Let Him be indicted on false charges, tried before a prejudiced jury, and convicted by a cowardly judge...*



Let Him see what it is to be completely abandoned and left terribly alone by both God and man...

Let Him be tortured and die!

And let Him die the most humiliating death - as part of a bloody crucifixion, alongside common thieves...

As the leaders of these angry groups announced God's sentence, cheers went up across the plain...

Yet after the final leader spoke there was a long silence. No one could move. For suddenly it hit them: **God in Jesus had already served His sentence!**

Christmas teaches us that when we end our life on earth, and stand before God, the righteous Judge - we'll look into His eyes, and we'll behold His mercy.

In the end, we'll all deal with a God who is acquainted with our grief - and has experienced our sorrows - and felt the limitations of our weakness - and has been tested by our temptations - *and now is willing to extend mercy to forgive even the vilest of our sins...*

Merciful eyes refuse to wink at sin. God will never ignore our sin, yet His eyes of mercy are willing to look past our sin - and probe our hearts **for faith...**

And where faith in the Savior is found, God bestows mercy and grants forgiveness. His mercy alone is reason enough to get our **hands up** this Christmas!

Luke 2:9 tells us something marvelous and miraculous happened to the shepherds who were watching their flocks on

that first Christmas Eve... As Luke puts it, “the glory of the Lord shone around them.”

In fields of Bethlehem they were surrounded by the **majesty** of God... They ran to the manger to behold the **mystery** of God Incarnate... And they went away that day relieved to experience God’s incredible **mercy**.

We’re told in verse 20, “Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen...” Obviously, the shepherds experienced a **hands-up Christmas**.

And this is my prayer for you and yours this holiday season. May you be surrounded by the glory of God!

**His majesty, the mystery, and His mercy...**

**A hands-up Christmas** doesn’t mean a stick-up!

I’m not suggesting you need to be robbed. But if you approach this Christmas with your *hands-up* - with worship and wonder - surrendering to His will... *It will steal away* your doubts, and discontent, and cynicism, and discouragement - even your bitterness and pride.

**A hands-up Christmas** is good for the soul.

We all need to be *arrested* this Christmas by the glory of God - and we should respond to His glory by lifting our heart, and voice, and hands in praise!

If you want this Christmas to be your best Christmas ever... **hands down...** then why not you make it a **hands-on**, and a **hands-off**, and a **hands-out**, and especially a **hands-up** Christmas! Amen and Amen.

