

AN INCONSPICUOUS START

LUKE 1:26-33

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And having come in, the angel said to her, "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women!" But when she saw him, she was troubled at his saying, and considered what manner of greeting this was. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.

And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name JESUS.

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.

When Roger Craig played baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals he was never renowned for his hitting abilities. Craig was a standout pitcher, *but poor at the plate*.

Calling a game in 1964, legendary announcer Harry Caray, screamed to St. Louis fans, "I can't believe it! Roger Craig just hit a line-drive off the left centerfield wall. The Cards are gonna win the pennant!"

Caray's prediction came true. The Cards did win the 1964 National League pennant, but what made Caray's words so noteworthy was that they occurred in April.

Craig hit his line-drive during the season's 4th game.

To the average observer nothing in Roger Craig's hit would've caused anyone to raise an eyebrow - let alone, predict a championship. One hit in the 4th game of a 162-game season would seem to be no big deal.

Yet somehow Harry Caray saw in Craig's rare show of power a precursor of grand successes yet to come!

And likewise, for the outside observer nothing in the events surrounding that first Christmas in Nazareth would've warranted any special consideration...

So a young maiden discovers she's with child - this was a daily occurrence. To the casual observer there was nothing unique, or noteworthy about the event.

Certainly, there was nothing that would warrant the prediction made by the Angel to Mary, "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."

Here was a child resting in the womb of a young Jewish girl in a backwoods village called Nazareth. The Hebrew Talmud listed 63 of the most prominent Galilean towns - and Nazareth failed to make the list.

Kings were born and kingdoms begun in fortresses and capitols of great empires, what could originate in Nazareth that would prompt such a prediction?

Besides Mary and Joseph were peasants. Sure they had a solid pedigree. They could trace her lineage back to King David and the Patriarch Abraham, but so could other Jewish couples. The families of Mary and Joseph had long been deposed and stripped of their royal positions. They were no longer even remotely connected to the seats of power and influence.

There was little in the resume' of the participants - or in their circumstances - that gave the least credence to the angel's announcement. Who would possibly predict that a peasant girl from Nazareth would have a child who would be called *"the Son of the Highest"* and would establish *a Kingdom that would never end?*

The new king had not even been born, yet already it was predicted He would establish a forever kingdom.

In essence this was not even the 4th game of the season - *it was still spring training!* Yet this angelic Harry Caray was already predicting a championship.

Actually a casual observer of the first Christmas had less on which to base his prediction than Harry Caray. At least Craig hit a line-drive. The events surrounding the first Christmas seem more like a bloop single...

The baby is born in a barn because his parent's can't get a motel room... His only visitors are a few shabby, shady, smelly shepherds... His parents are so poor they can't buy a lamb to make a sacrifice and instead offer turtledoves... A puppet potentate named Herod flexes his muscle, and drives them into African exile...

Tell me again, *this Child will be called "the Son of the Highest and of His kingdom there will be no end?"*

Obviously, this King and His Kingdom get off to a very inconspicuous start. *Humble beginnings for sure!*

Remember Jesus was born in an era of greatness.

The Roman poet named Virgil, writing at the time of Christ, looked forward to *"a new order of the ages."*

He penned these words, *"a new human race is descending from the heights of heaven - (a change will come, due to) the birth of a child, with whom the iron age of humanity will end and the golden age will begin."* Virgil talked of the *"restorer of the world."*

Hearing the phrases, *"new human race"* and *"golden age"* and *"restorer of the world"* might cause you to think you were reading a Hebrew prophet speaking of the coming of Messiah. Yet the visions of Virgil were not of Jesus, but of Caesar Augustus in far off Rome.

Realize, Rome was the super-power of the day - the greatest kingdom the world had seen to that point.

If the Son of the Highest was to appear, surely He'd do so from the capitol of the empire. If an eternal kingdom came, it would have to carry a Roman banner.

Phillip Yancey writes in his book, *"The Jesus I Never Knew,"* *"Audacious as it may be to dream that a tiny province wedged in among great powers would produce a worldwide ruler, nonetheless the Jews believed just that."* As strange as it might seem the kingdom of God started off-the-beaten path - in what was the outback of the empire - on the fringes.

This King and Kingdom had an inconspicuous start.

Once, a Christian missionary to an Islamic country made an interesting remark, "*God is great!*", the cry of the Moslems, is a truth which needed no supernatural being to teach them. But the truth that's hard to grasp - that we need divine help to understand - the truth that Jesus brought to man was that *God is little!*"

That God is greater than His creation - that His presence fills the universe is self-evident. It's not hard to understand that God is infinite and omnipotent.

An open mind and a night sky shouts that truth!

But Christmas teaches us the opposite. That God can also be *simple and small and vulnerable and plain.*

Recently, Queen Elizabeth of England paid a private visit to the United States, but she didn't exactly come alone. Included in her 4000 pounds of luggage were two outfits for each occasion, 40 pints of blood plasma, and white leather toilet seat covers. She also brought her own hairdresser, two valets, and an army of other attendants. Her brief, royal visit cost over \$20 million.

Yet King Jesus entered this world with nothing. He came naked and empty-handed - with no accessories.

One author writes, "*God emerged in Palestine as a baby who could not speak, or eat solid food, or control His bladder - who depended on a teenage couple for shelter, food, love... A mule could've stepped on Him.*"

There is an Italian movie that opens with a helicopter ferrying a giant, concrete statue of Jesus to the city of Rome. The helicopter passes over the landscape as the giant Jesus hangs from a sleeve with His arms outstretched. At one point a farmer spots the statue.

He looks up into the sky above his crops and shouts out, "*Hey, it's Jesus.*" He hops off his tractor and follows the statue across his field... As the helicopter moves closer to Rome it passes over a swimming pool full of bikini-clad girls. The copter pilot swoops low to get a closer look. The concrete Jesus just hangs in mid-air expressionless.... *And there are people who envision the real Jesus similar to this concrete Jesus...*

He's huge and heavy. He seems to lack empathy. He hovers over the world with no emotion. Jesus seems removed, and judgmental, and distant. *How can He relate to our modern world? How can He help us cope with the rough and tumble of where we live our lives?*

But Christmas forever dispels these notions. Jesus is no concrete Christ. He feels, and cares, and joins our plight. Though all the universe cannot contain Him - He became small enough to fit on a fallen planet - so small He could lay in a manger. Nothing on earth is as weak and helpless as a baby - yet, a baby He became.

I love the thought that C. S. Lewis once penned, "*Naturally enough, we want God to be God, but God wants to be a human being, a baby in a manger. We want God to be strong so that we can be weak, but God wants to be weak so that we can be strong.*"

In Jesus, God became one of us - *one of the weaklings*. He doesn't hover over us as some concrete figure bent on intimidating without understanding. He's not a figure we can brush-off as cold and hard.

Rather in Christ, God gets up-close. He experiences our situation. He enables us from the inside out.

The Son of God became a baby and wiggled His way into this world. He wiggled His way into the hearts of a mother and father as babies have a way of doing.

And ever since, the Son of God and His kingdom have been wiggling their way into the broken hearts of people who humble themselves and call on His name.

Several years ago, my son and I visited London, and while there, we happened upon a state reception.

The Queen came out of Buckingham Palace to welcome the President of South Korea. *But the Queen never just appears...* She was preceded by bobbies, and troops, and mounts, and cavalry. Crews of workers took down stoplights - put up banners - swept the street. The road from Buckingham Palace to Admiralty Arch overflowed with pomp and circumstance.

And it attracted a crowd. When the Queen finally rolled down the street, a throng of people had gathered to welcome her... *including two Yanks from America!*

Usually, this is what accompanies a king and his kingdom. But apart from the angels appearing to a few shepherds, there was no pageantry or fanfare when Jesus entered the

world. On that first Christmas, the locals in Bethlehem had no idea what had happened.

When Jesus grew up and began to teach He spoke of the Kingdom of God, but even then the Jewish leaders were confused. To them kingdoms consisted of buildings, parliaments, courts, institutions, militaries - none of which were associated with Jesus' Kingdom.

Where was this kingdom of which Jesus spoke?

In Luke 17:20, when the Jews asked Jesus about His kingdom, He replied, "The kingdom of God does not come with observation; nor will they say, 'see here!' or 'see there!' for indeed, the kingdom of God is within you." God's kingdom isn't a physical, visible kingdom. It's a spiritual kingdom that captures human hearts.

Jesus' Kingdom works and expands incognito, under the surface, undetected by worldly measurements.

Did you know that the Internet began in 1962 when Paul Baran, an engineer from the Rand Corporation, discovered how to move digital messages through a network of United States Defense Department computers. Nine years-later a whopping 23 computers were a part of what was then called the ARPAnet.

Still in 1984 when IBM introduced the first personal computer a mere 1000 computers were on the Internet. As late as 1992, only a million computers were online.

Something big was growing, but at the time very few folks in the world were aware of what was happening.

And likewise, with God's kingdom. Today, the Kingdom of God grows and expands, but it does so unnoticed by many people. God is doing something big, but millions the world over remain oblivious.

Christmas reminds us that the kingdom of God began as a tiny vine crawling along the floor of a forest full of ancient oaks. Those who look to the treetops to find it never see it. But those who look lower find it growing outward, clinging to the ground - ever taking the low road, but constantly expanding its influence.

The Christmas story sets a pattern for the spread of God's kingdom over the last 2000 years. It teaches us that God works quietly and inconspicuously. He works His mightiest miracles in the most *unpretentious*, and *unassuming* and *non-intimidating* ways.

That was the case that first Christmas morning. Despite appearances - what was seen, *or better yet not seen* - despite the lack of pomp and circumstance - despite its humble surroundings, and inauspicious start, on that first Christmas morning a King was born.

Though no newspaper was there to report it - a new kingdom had invaded - God's kingdom had come.

Of course, an evil Herod was still ruling in Jerusalem. Roman troops were still patrolling the streets and stringing up Jewish patriots. Tax collectors continued to pilfer the pockets of successful merchants. Beggars still roamed the streets in search of a handout...

On the surface nothing changed - yet underneath, everything changed. A new force had penetrated behind enemy lines. A new power had invaded.

God's kingdom of life and light had invaded Satan's kingdom of death and darkness. A divine beachhead was established in Bethlehem that would tip the scales of the battle. The world would never be the same.

And it was Simeon, the old man who approached Mary and Joseph in the Temple, who sensed what had occurred in the spiritual realm. Simeon somehow knew that the tide had finally turned. The present world order was now on its way out - and a new kingdom had been established that would one day rule the universe.

Simeon defined the stature of Mary's baby when he picked Him up, and uttered, "Behold, this Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel." This new king would sit in judgment of every man's destiny.

Historian HG Wells, himself not a Christian, but an astute observer of historical trends, made a comment about Jesus, "The historian's test of an individual's greatness is '*What did he leave to grow?*' Did he start men thinking along fresh lines with a vigor that persisted after him? By this test Jesus stands first."

On the open waters sometimes the fog can get so thick that you can stand on the deck of a ship, and another vessel will pass by without you even seeing it.

The fog and darkness keep the ship invisible, *but you feel it pass*. In fact, you can even gauge the size of the vessel that passes by the wake it leaves behind.

And likewise, with the Kingdom of God... When a person is forgiven, when peace comes to their heart and it changes the course of their life, when an empty person is filled with boldness - you see God at work. You feel the tremendous wake of a powerful force.

God's kingdom works undercover, under the surface, behind the scenes, *but, oh, how dramatically it works!*

As the angel said to Mary, "of His kingdom there will be no end." God's work is sure and true. And though it's not always seen, He is building an eternal kingdom!

This Christmas season don't get confused by what you see... *Herod still sits in seats of power. Rome still taxes our pockets. Beggars still roam the streets.*

We're tempted to wonder, *where is God?* I thought His Kingdom had come? But, never forget that it has!

Christ reigns in our hearts. Just because we don't always see Him, it doesn't mean that God is not at work behind the scenes, accomplishing His purposes.

On the surface this world is a troubled place, but underneath it all a kingdom is growing. God's Spirit is on the move spreading His love and peace and liberty.

The kingdoms we can see will not prevail. It's God's kingdom that will last forever. And one day, when the time is right, the babe who has occupied the manger all these years

will return, and take possession of a world that belongs to Him. Jesus will sit on the throne, and establish in this world His everlasting Kingdom.

Don't get confused by the gentleness, and meagerness, and innocence of that first Christmas.

Yes, spiritually-speaking it was just Roger Craig hitting a ball off the outfield wall, but it was enough for those in the know to realize something monumental had actually taken place... *Hey, the angels knew...*

On that first Christmas, they erupted with a standing ovation. Shepherds gave each other high-fives. Heaven bought championship T-shirts! In the long scope of history it was just spring training, but the angel who visited Mary predicted a championship.

Of course, there wasn't much to show for it... In this age - there never is. When it comes to God's work don't be discouraged by an inconspicuous start.

God's beginnings are often small, and unspectacular, and usually go unnoticed by the crowd - but when God does a work it grows to grand and forever proportions!

The world was never the same because of the events of that first Christmas. Eternity was altered.

A King was born and a kingdom had come.