



# PREPARING TO STAND

Number 65 — December, 2012

---

“In this age, just prior to the second coming of Christ in the clouds of heaven, God calls for men who will prepare a people to stand in the great day of the Lord.” SW 3-21-1905

---

## **THE MESSAGE OF THE MANGER**

sermon given by Godfrey Miranda at the Hillcrest Seventh-day Adventist Church  
in Bakersfield, California on December 17, 2011 (edited by Jim Buller)

Open with me to the Gospel of Luke. We will spend most of our time in chapter two. To be honest with you, the Gospel of Luke hasn't always been the easiest gospel for me to understand. But recently, I have come to appreciate it more. The Gospel of Luke, I think, is a 'smart gospel.' Luke has a way of telling certain stories, in a certain sequence—it's not necessarily chronologically organized, although there are chronological elements—but Luke is actually telling his gospel in a way that he wants you to understand the theological concepts that are going on. It's the 'smart gospel.'

For example, he tells certain stories side by side. In Luke chapter eighteen he tells the story of the rich young ruler. And then in chapter nineteen, he tells the story of another rich man, one who is short in stature—you remember, Zacheus? Here we have two rich men who each have an encounter with Jesus, yet they have very different responses. The rich young ruler walks away sorrowfully. Whereas the short man, the tax collector Zacheus, says, "Yes Jesus! Come to my house!" Here we see how Luke has a way of putting stories together, setting them side by side because he wants us to see a comparison. He wants us to see a contrast. He wants us to see the differences.

So when we go to the opening chapters of Luke, we find he's doing it again. In Luke chapter one, we find two appearances of the Angel Gabriel. Gabriel appears to Zacharias and announces the birth of John the Baptist. Now you remember Zacharias' response, he says, "What are you talking about?!" (That's Godfrey's translation of the Bible.) And because of his skepticism, the angel says "You are going to be a mute until all these things will be fulfilled."

Later on in the chapter Gabriel appears again. This time not to a priest in the temple named Zacharias, but to a simple, common young woman named Mary. When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, yes she's shocked, but her response isn't one of skepticism, it's one of submission. And so we can see the contrast.

And then again, as we keep reading in chapter one, sure enough, we find another contrast. Mary sings out a song, a prophetic song, to God that describes the character and mission of Jesus the Messiah. Then later on in chapter one, Zacharias—now he's not mute anymore, for his son has been born, and he's named him "John"—

Zacharias is filled with the spirit of prophecy and lifts up a song, not about the character and mission of the Messiah, but of the character and mission of his son John the Baptist, the *messenger* to the Messiah. So again we see these differences and contrasts in Luke's gospel.

As we read on, we once again have another contrast, the one that I want us to focus on. In the last part of Luke chapter one, we find the birth of John the Baptist, and then in Luke chapter two, there is another story about someone being born—the birth of Jesus. Let's pick up the story in Luke chapter one verses fifty-seven and fifty-eight, where the Bible says, "Now Elizabeth's full time came for her to be delivered, and she brought forth a son. When her neighbors and relatives heard how the Lord had shown great mercy to her, they rejoiced with her." Maybe you are a visual person like myself—I like to kind of play the movie in my mind as I read scripture. So if we picture what's going on, the lights are bright! The colors are warm! The sounds are happy! Everybody's rejoicing! This is a great birth story. Hearts are full. The whole town, the whole neighborhood, is just rejoicing over the birth of this little boy.

But when we turn to Luke chapter two, and find the next story of a birth, it's a little bit different. The lights aren't so bright. The feel isn't as warm. Reading from Luke chapter two verse one, it begins, "And it came to pass in those days, that a decree went out from Cesar Augustus that all the world should be registered." Even here, there's just a hint of some tension. Here is a reminder that the Jewish Nation is not independent, that there is a Roman rule, a Roman Empire that lords over it. Verse two, "This census first took place while Quirnius was governing Syria." Verse three, "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." Verse five, "To be registered with"—what's the next phrase?—"Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child." Catch it? Verse five says that this is Mary, not his wife, but "his *betrothed* wife," his soon to be wife, and this soon to be wife was, "*with child*."

Now usually that's a happy story—"Awe! You're pregnant! When are you due?" "Oh-h-h! You look great!" And stuff like that. But this description of Luke is a little bit different. He says they were *betrothed* to be married, and she was *with child*. So even from the very beginning of Jesus birth story, there is a little bit of impropriety. There is a little bit of scandal. There is a little bit of secrecy. So the colors are dark, and the lights are dim. Yet this is the story of our Savior's birth!

Verse six, "So it was, that while they were there." This was in the city of Bethlehem, so this was *not* home. In other words, while they were *far* from home, while they *weren't* with their family and their friends, while things were foreign and unfamiliar, and completely uncomfortable as we'll soon see, "So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for *her* to be delivered." Verse seven, "And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a"—what's the next word?—"In a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn."

Now over the years and years of celebrating Christmas, and singing about "Away in a Manger," and things like that, we've come to have a glorified picture of a "manger" in our minds. But the word "manger," it's literally really a "*stall*!" You know a place, like in Luke 13:15, where the same word is used—"Leading an ox from his stall." Leading the ox from the place where he sleeps, the place where he eats. Actually the root Greek

word is 'to eat.' So possibly this is not just the *place* where animals eat, but this is like the *feeding box*.

I don't know? I wouldn't go down to Babies-R-Us and look for a "manger" to put *my* baby in. This is something that—you just wouldn't write this story—it's not, 'picture perfect.' Did you catch that? The story of Jesus, the Message of the Manger, is that it's *not* 'picture perfect.' It's a mess! It is actually something you'd want to avoid.

And yet the story continues in verse eight, "And now, there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks by night." Verse nine, "And behold, the angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shown around them, and they were greatly afraid. Then the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid, for behold, I bring you' —What kind of tidings? —"Good tidings of great joy." —Which will be to how many people?— "To *all* people, for there is born to you this day, in the city of David, a" —What's the next word — "a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." Now who is listening to the angels at this point? Who are the angels speaking to? —The *shepherds*.

Now remember in the other story of John the Baptist's birth, Elizabeth is at *home*. She is surrounded by her *friends* and *family*. Her relatives are spreading the news abroad. Yet here in the story of Jesus nobody even *notices* that Jesus is born. Nobody even *cares*. So the angels are looking for anybody that would care. And when they scope the landscape, they see just outside of Bethlehem, the home town of David, they see in those fields where David probably once was a shepherd, they see shepherds who are probably talking, about, "Man, won't it be great when the Son of David comes and takes out this Roman Empire that requires everybody to be registered and accounted for!" These shepherds are longing for a Savior! And the angels notice —"Hey! Hey! They're looking for a Savior!" So the angels announce, "Unto you is born this day a Savior."

In their minds the shepherds are probably thinking: Greatness! Glory! Grandeur! Christ the Lord! Yet in verse twelve, the angels have to add an additional description, to really hone and focus what it is that they are to be looking for. "And this will be the sign to you, you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." Let's read that again so we are sure to notice how the angels say it. Verse twelve, "And *this* will be the" —What's the next word?— "The *sign* to you." "This will be the *sign* to you."

Actually that word "sign," it means, "token," or "miracle." In the Gospel of John, John records seven miracles of Jesus, and John actually calls them "*signs*." The first miracle was the turning of water into wine in Cana of Galilee. And John, writing his gospel says, "This is the beginning of the *signs* of Jesus." These are the beginning of the *miracles* of Jesus, the beginning of the *wonders*! And so the angel says, "This will be the *wonder* to you." "This will be the *sign*" —the signet of heaven. This will be the *indication* that this is not some ordinary birth. This will be the 'token' that this is from *heaven itself*. Well, what is that token? How am I to know that God is actually at work here? How are we to know? The angels say that this will be the sign —"You will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." Now catch this. The manger is messy. The manger is crude. The manger is something we would rather avoid. Yet Jesus' story indicates to us, the angels announcement tells us, that the very *sign*, the very *fingerprint* of divinity, is the fact that Jesus is lying in a manger.

Now here's the point. Could it be, that the very token of God's handiwork in *our* lives is not when things are 'picture perfect,' but when things are actually in a mess. Ask

yourself the question, When are those times when you really felt confident that God was at work in your life? Was it when 'all the stars lined up?' When all the lights turned green? When all the doors were open, when everything was just smooth sailing? Suppose you're running a program, you're getting things together, and you're trying to get this project running, (I don't know what it might be). But you're looking for some indication that God is on your side, that God is really with you. Is it when everything is running smoothly that you say, "Ah yes! That's it!"

But how often, do we find situations in which all the 'stars' are *not* lined up! All the lights are *red!* All the doors are *closed!* Everyone is turning their *back* on you! In these moments that we feel as though we are *forsaken* by God, could it be that the Message of the Manger is that this is really the *sign* of heaven? Could it be that God is actually at work in the *messy* moments of our life? When Isaiah fifty-five says that God's thoughts are not our thoughts, neither are His ways our ways, I think this aspect is included —that God is at work, even when it's not 'picture perfect.' Or maybe I should say, especially, *especially* when it's not 'picture perfect.'

In First Corinthians one verse twenty-seven, Paul is writing to the Corinthians. He says, you know God chose "the weak things of the world to shame the strong," and "the foolish things to shame the wise." Could it be that this is actually God's *modus operandi*? His 'M.O.'? In other words, *this is the way He operates!* He actually is in the business of looking at a mess —not necessarily causing the mess— but looking at it and being able to work *in spite* of it! To work in the *midst* of it. For example, when Paul writes in Romans eight, verse twenty-eight, "For God causes all things to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose." Ah Ha! Sure enough! God can do it! Not just once in a while, but *that's how He moves* —even when it's not 'picture perfect.'

This is not a singular incident in scripture. In Romans chapter four, Paul is writing about the experience of Abraham —you know, "Father Abraham?" Take a look at verses seventeen through twenty-one. Here, Paul is using Abraham as an example of faith, and in verse seventeen it says, "As it is written, I have made you a father of many nations." So Paul is referring to the promise that God gave to Abraham. "As it is written I have made you a father of many nations in the presence of Him whom he believed." And who is this that Abraham believed? —"God, who gives life to the dead, and calls those things which do not exist as though they did!" Wow! God looks at a situation, He sees that maybe there's nothing there, but He calls it into existence! Think about that! Think about Genesis chapter one, when He walks onto the stage of human history, everything is nothingness and void, and He simply *speaks* life and light into existence. Where there was *nothing*, He calls out *something*. This is the God that Abraham believes in.

And notice how Paul phrases it in verse eighteen, it says, "Who contrary to hope, in hope believed." In other words, when all other indication says, "No! No! No! Hopeless! Hopeless! Hopeless!" Abraham said, "Hope." "Who contrary to hope, in hope believed, so that he became the father of many nations according to what was spoken, 'so shall your descendants be.'" Verse nineteen, "And did not being weak in faith, he did not consider his own body already dead, since he was about a hundred years old." He thought his body was useless, but it's not like he dwelt upon that. The verse continues, "And the deadness of Sarah's womb." Verse twenty, "He did not *waver* at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God.. And being

fully convinced” —“*Fully convinced*, that what He had *promised*, He was *also able to preform*.”

Abraham said, “Look, this is the God who said, ‘Let there be light!’ and there *was* light. If He said I’m going to be ‘a father of many nations,’ I’m *going to be* a father of many nations.” You see, Abraham had something going for him. He had what I like to call, the ‘Habit of Hope.’ Did you catch it? Abraham had learned the Habit of Hope. He had gotten into the practice of looking into at a situation that wasn’t necessarily ideal, He had gotten into the practice of looking at a situation that wasn’t ‘picture perfect,’ and instead of focusing on the inadequacies of the situation, or the inadequacies of himself, he said, “No! Although all other indications say, ‘Hopeless! Hopeless! Hopeless!’ I am going to chose to stand on the promises of God, and say, ‘Hope.’” He *practiced* the *Habit of Hope*.

This is also the habit of so many others throughout scripture. You think about Joseph as a prisoner in Egypt. He looks at the situation: My brothers gave up on me. They actually sold me as a slave. What am I supposed to do here? What is God’s purpose for me here? But he practiced the Habit of Hope —the Habit of Hope.

Look at Daniel as a captive in Babylon. He was of the royal line. He was a goodly handsome young man. He was skilled in knowledge and wisdom. And here he is in Babylon. How is he to fulfill God’s purpose here? As he looks around at the situation he could have chosen to simply focus on the failings of his surroundings. But no, he practices the Habit of Hope. And God uses him to convert the heart of a pagan king! —Nebuchadnezzar.

Paul and Silas are in prison. Talk about a dark place to be. They were going on God’s errands —right? They were preaching the gospel. Yet they find themselves in a Macedonian prison. And what do they do? —They’re singing their hearts out in praise to God. And an earthquake hits! Everybody is set free —yet they don’t go anywhere. The Philippian jailor wants to kill himself, but Paul says, “No!-No!-No!-No! We’re still here!” That Philippian jailor is converted, and from that experience grows a booming community of faith which evangelizes that whole area. Paul and Silas practiced the Habit of Hope.

This is something that I think is really, really practical, because it has some significant implications in our life. There may be more, but I’m going to identify three of these implications. So think about it. What is it that the Holy Spirit would like to apply in your experience? In your personal realm of thought and action?

Think about the implications that the Habit of Hope has on the way we view our life circumstances. So consider your life circumstances right now. How many of us, as we look at our life circumstances, could say that everything is not ‘picture perfect’ right now —Yeah? So if we are looking at these messy life circumstances, the implication of the Habit of Hope is this: There’s a mess. There’s failed finances. There’s ill health. There’s rocky relationships. There’s this, there’s that, you know the list could go on and on. But if we were to practice the Habit of Hope in this situation —the Message of the Manger— we would be able to say, “Look, even in the midst of that, *God is at work*.”

*Even* in the midst of that! The promise of Psalm one thirty-eight, verse eight, where it says, “God will accomplish what concerns me today.” Even in the midst of that —*especially*, in the midst of that— God is at work!

When you take a survey of your life circumstances, and you see that: This is wrong. This is off. Or, I could totally do without that! When everything seems sour. It’s

not that you have been abandon by God. *It's not!* Please, rebuke the devil in the name of Jesus, and silence that voice. Because if Mary and Joseph were to have taken that stance, where would God's handiwork be in their situation? No-No-No-No! The angel said, "*This* is the sign." This is actually the indication that God is at work, that heaven has come down to earth, that His divine fingerprints are all over this situation. What's the sign? —It's the mess! God is working, even in the midst, and especially in the midst of whatever it is that you think are just indications of the complete opposite. In hope against hope. You can believe when it comes to your life circumstances.

OK, implication number two. How about this: not just when you take a survey of your life circumstances, the things around you, but how about when you take a survey of yourself? How about your view of yourself? —I just don't have this gift. I just don't look this way. I don't talk like he does. I don't have this. Again, the list could go on. You can focus on your inadequacies and your short comings, or you can practice the Habit of Hope. And say that even with this against me, even with this track record that isn't so glorious, I am in an arena in which *God is at work*. Even when my life is not 'picture perfect,' the promise of Ephesians chapter two verse ten, is still true. "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works." God is *still* at work!

I remember a song that I used to hear playing at my house a lot. "Kids under construction, maybe the paint is still wet." The thing is this, that even when things in my life, even when things about me personally aren't up to the standard that I have in my mind. Even when it seems like I could just give up on myself. *God is still at work*. Because, what is the sign? —It's the Baby in a manger. That's the sign of God's handiwork.

OK, so implication number one, is that it changes the way we view life around us. Implication number two, is that it changes the way we view *ourselves*. Implication number three, is how about when we look at the mess in other people's lives? If you were to be very, very honest, in those times when you become aware that something is not necessarily right in someone else's life, or in a certain community's life. Or, you're looking at others around you, and you look at the mess in their lives, there is, whether consciously or unconsciously, a tendency to evaluate them, and say, "Oh, God must not be at work in *their* lives." But friends, I would suggest, that when it comes to, not just the view of life around us, not just the view of life for ourselves, but when it comes to viewing others lives, I would *appeal* that we practice the Habit of Hope for *others*.

Some of us may not readily see the implications of this. As we look around us we might be tempted to say, "Aw, God is *not* working in that group of people." But what if He *is*? Suppose, just through our worldly assessment of things, we say, "Hopeless! Hopeless! Hopeless! Hopeless!" And we've accounted them as a hopeless case to God. Yet God is actually implying that through the sign of the manger that we can practice the Habit of Hope in *other people lives*.

Being around certain groups of people, I've come across certain attitudes. Whether it's the Adventist church, or Adventist schools, or whatever communities we might belong to, we might just look at all the things that are going up and down. It's easy for us to focus on all the things against it, and just say, "Aaugh!" Friend, I would encourage you, in those moments *especially* that *God is still at work!* And to *practice the Habit of Hope*. If we don't see how change is possible, we need to get on our knees and pray that the God who can fulfill His promises, that the God who sees nothing and

can speak something, that the God who sees death and says there's life; *pray* that that God would move on behalf of that group, or that person that we think is a lost cause.

Practice the Habit of Hope not just for life around you, not just for self improvement, practice the Habit of Hope when it comes to your relationships with those around you. *Please! Please!* This is the Message of the Manger. The *sign* of God's handiwork is that He is still moving when it's messy.

And it's not to say that when things *are* 'picture perfect' that He's not moving. —Right? John the Baptist's birth, was 'picture perfect,' and God was definitely at work in that moment. But friend, the message is that even when it is *not* 'picture perfect,' when it is crude, and not right, and totally 'out of whack,' don't discount it. In hope against hope, believe, and don't waiver at the promise of God.

Wow! How my life would be completely different, the kinds of words that I speak in the moments of distress or anxiety, or when things just aren't going my way; how I would operate differently if had practiced the Habit of Hope moment by moment, day by day.

Friends this morning the message is very simple —practice the Habit of Hope. When you view your life circumstances, when you view your own self image, when you view other people or other groups of people around you, *practice the Habit of Hope*. Choose to focus on the promises of God instead of the inadequacies or shortcomings of the things around you. Practice the Habit of Hope.

Maybe today, the Holy Spirit is actually impressing your heart in a certain way —that there's certain things you need to surrender to God. Maybe there are certain trains of thought that you've held on to. Perhaps it's the way you think about the situation you are in. Maybe it's the way you think about yourself. Or maybe it's the way you're thinking about someone else or some 'others' around you. Maybe even an apology is needed, or a time of sincere confession is needed. As we break into a new year, this is an appropriate time for confession and reconciliation. And so, as we close I would just encourage you to let those things be surrendered to Jesus. Ask that He would fix in your mind the promises of God, so that you can actually practice the Habit of Hope. Cling to these promises in those moments of mess, in those moments of crudeness, in those moments when things aren't the way they should be. Cling to God's promises, and practice *the Habit of Hope*.

-----

Godfrey Miranda is currently pastor at the  
Parkwood Seventh-day Adventist Church in Modesto, California