

The children this morning covered a lot of ground. They brought us from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Real life that's a distance of 70+ miles. They shared it with us in the matter of a 27-ft-long aisle (from the back of church to the front here). They portrayed what happened at a stable in Bethlehem, as well as what occurred on the angel-brightened hillsides outside town "nearby" – all in an 18ft wide area (here in front).

John covers a much greater distance in these opening verses of this record of Jesus' history. The "ground" in this instance is on a timeline. Remember the opening of our service. We read vs.1-5. John takes us all the way back before anything was created; and we behold Jesus, God the Son, there. John then carries us across thousands of years from the days of creation, to the time God the Son "became flesh and made his dwelling among us." So Jesus is eternal, yet we can celebrate a birth day when he – our God – came on His mission to rescue us.

Now, we jump forward from Christmas, to 30 years later. You might be scurrying over the verses of John ch.1 and asking: "What did I miss? How did we get from birth to 30 in the matter of a few breath fulls of words?" Rest assured: Jesus passed from infancy to childhood, from childhood to youth, from youth to manhood; and we know but the briefest details.

We know, as we heard this morning, about His birth (Luke 2:1-20). We know also about a short visit to Jerusalem several weeks after his birth, and a few people took notice of our Savior's presence that day (Luke 2:21-40). A few others, the magi / wise men, generated renewed buzz many days down the road. They arrived from their distant land to worship the Christ child (Matthew 2:1-12). Herod – the ruler in the land – didn't like that news. He soon launched an assassination attempt. But Jesus was carried off before Herod's deadly rage reached Bethlehem. Jesus goes "off the radar" pretty much then. There are no more visitors from the countryside or distant lands. Even when He visits Jerusalem with his family at age 12, his presence goes largely unnoticed. A few teachers and temple-goers are amazed at his understanding, but we hear of no buzz created beyond that. And that's the way things remained. Until...

At last an appearance shattered the silence; a messenger burst on the scene. But not the angel type, like from 30 years earlier. John the disciple describes John the Baptizer's emergence.

It's really a perfect fit that this is the appointed Bible Reading on the Sunday when the children share the Christmas news. The children were only the messengers up here. The message is not about them. They told you: "Don't miss Him! Look at who Jesus is."

People came asking John the Baptizer about himself. "I am not the Christ. Who I am isn't what matters. I am a voice – that's my role. Now listen to what I have to say: Don't miss the Lord's coming to you. The Christ, the Lord, stands among you."

Wow! Well, if that is the case, why did the people not know him, if he was right in the middle of them? Especially since he holds such a position – such honor – that John says "I am unworthy" to handle the laces of his sandals.

Let's find answers here in God's Word to a couple important questions:

- ✓ Why does John the Baptizer say about Jesus “I am unworthy to untie his sandals”?
- ✓ And why didn’t the people know who Jesus was on their own?

Two key facts stand out today that help us answer our questions:

#1- God the Son came humbly.

Vs.15,30 – John the Baptizer said: though He – Jesus – comes after me, he is greater than me, because he was before me. God the Son took on flesh. He was born of Mary a few months after John was born of Elizabeth. Yet, as John indicates, Jesus is greater. Though no one could tell from merely looking at Jesus stand in front of them, He was (and is) eternal - almighty.

Vs.10 – the world was made through him, but people did not recognize him.

“The Lord of Creation, the one who formed the first man from the dust of the earth and then woman from that man, became dust himself.” “He came to be dust like us...” – to live life like us – “...to be lonely and filled with sadness ...to experience disappointment and loss ... to call us his brothers and sisters.” (Forward In Christ, Dec.2014)

Why did He come so humbly, become so fully human that he is like us in every way but without sin? He entered into our darkness, in order to give us Light and Life.

God is not talking about the short life of 70 or 80 years (average) that we have before death knocks us out cold. God is not talking about natural light. The current sun in the sky will one day be darkened. The Light and Life that Jesus came to bring us are lasting – so much so, they are everlasting.

So what gets in the way of people seeing and believing that? Here’s the next key fact:

#2- For people to see this truth of God, God must go to his demolition work.

This is what John the Baptizer is speaking about, when he proclaimed: *“Make straight the way for the Lord.”* Let’s talk about what that means:

Someone in John’s day would have naturally thought of a road project when hearing that kind of terminology. We can certainly relate to that concept. The I-295 road project is making its way across Fayetteville’s north side. I kind of dream of the day it’s finished, and getting home from I-95 is so much easier. I heard a week ago from Pastor Lange how his city, Jacksonville NC, has been petitioning for years to get I-40 extended to its doorstep. They cite the huge economic impact it would bring their way.

Was John the Baptizer talking about the equivalent in his day? Was he petitioning for an extension of the ancient “interstate” system the Romans had made, with a branch of the Roman Way paved out to the Jordan River? No. John was not lobbying the Roman Governor to approve a special interest project for him.

This is the very personal moment for each of us hearing today’s message. Because the construction site John is talking about is the human heart of each one of us. The way this gets really personal is: what mess does God have to demolish and remove here?

False human pride must be leveled. Nothing we do can get us even a step closer to God in heaven. Why? We are sinful. Crooked self-interest warps our hearts, and pours out in so many instances in what we say and in the ways we act. Nothing we do can clear the record of our offenses, our sins, against God, and the hell we deserve because of them.

The toughest terrain on which to do construction work is the human heart. And the only way to accomplish change is the God-given way. God's Word knocks down the sinful barriers that would keep our heart blocked off, closed up from recognizing our spiritual helplessness, and need for someone to rescue us.

Heaped up in their mountainous mass is the rubble of our sin: all our times of missing the divine standard established by God. Our God in his holiness cannot allow us to walk into his eternal presence with sin, any amount.

Jesus came to carry away the whole mess of them. The very next words of John the Baptizer, after the words in our bulletin, direct us straight to Jesus. John identified Jesus, saying: *"Look, the One who takes away the sin of the world."*

Here's the side of the news today that is so wonderfully personal. We could do nothing to lift ourselves to heaven. But so great is the love of God! He himself came down, in order to be the Way for us to heaven.

His birth place? A borrowed barn. His first bed? A hand-me-down: a makeshift cradle, a trough previously occupied by animal snouts. And that was only the beginning of the length to which he humbled himself for us. The child who was lifted from his manger Christmas day would one day be lifted up on a cross. *"Whoever believes in Him – the Son of God, our Savior – has eternal life"* (John 3:15-18,36).

The wonder of Christmas is seen when we stoop down with John the Baptizer. We, like him, see: Jesus is our holy God. We admit, like John, that we are unworthy to handle the laces of our holy Lord's sandals. And we see, with John – oh, how wonderful the sight! –: our Savior doesn't run loose-sandaled away from us. He runs back from His empty grave, his hands still pierced but bringing in them forgiveness of sins, peace and eternal life with Him. This is his gift to you. May God grant all of us hearts that always believe this is the true message of Christmas! Amen.