

## THE REST OF THE CHRISTMAS STORY

When we hear the Christmas Story being read or see a play at a church about the Christmas Story, a good introduction or opening scene can be with the angel appearing to Mary, telling her that the Holy Spirit would come upon her and that she would have a child and He will be the Son of the Highest, that He would be the Son of God, and His name will be called Jesus and that He will reign over the house of Jacob forever. (**Luke 1:30-35**). Also included in the Christmas story is the shepherds that were watching their flock by night. An angel appears to them and says, "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!" (**Luke 2:10-14**) For many who attend the Christmas Story play or hear the retelling of the Christmas Story, it is the feel-good story of the year. It warms even the hardest of hearts. Then, no Christmas story would be complete without the wise men who had seen a star from the east and they followed the star that directed those wise men to where Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus stayed in Bethlehem. The Scriptures do not say how many wise men there were but the story has developed over time into saying there were three wise men, I suppose, based on the three gifts that were brought to Jesus. That is, gold, frankincense, and myrrh. (**Matthew 2:1-11**)

To end the Christmas program, there is then a narrator or the Pastor who ties in the story of the nativity with the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is the good news of WHY Jesus was born through the virgin Mary, in the little town of Bethlehem, and was wrapped in swaddling cloths and laying in a manger. This is where **John 3:16-17** can be read. "For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through Him might be saved."

The heart-warming story of baby Jesus, who's story begins for us when he is cooing and gurgling and giggling while laying in a manger (after all, the song "Away in a Manger" tells us "no crying He makes") and of the joyous celebration of the heavenly host as seen by the shepherds, where they are told, "peace and good-will toward men", and the wise men of the east who bring presents to the baby Jesus all the while Joseph and Mary stare blissfully at baby Jesus with a few barn animals that can bring "aws" and chuckles from the audience when they are played by children. This is not to be a mockery of what is the typical Christmas story that is reenacted by the fine folks of your local church. After all, it is in the telling of the soul-

stirring Christmas Story that makes it the perfect time for regular church members to invite neighbors, friends, and family members to hear the Christmas story and then the gospel of Jesus Christ. It is most certain that the pastor won't end the play with a beat-the-podium, rant and rave, REPENT, REPENT, REPENT, fire and brimstone message. Likewise, if there are a lot of children in the play there is more of a chance to get other family members to come see the cute little darling dressed up in a sheep or donkey costume.

Yet, there is much more to the Christmas Story that can be told which sheds light into the gospel of Jesus Christ, that is, the good news of Jesus Christ. In this we find, not just the heart-tugging, sweet-grandma-telling story of baby Jesus but we see the good and the bad news that lurks behind the set of the town of Bethlehem that doesn't get seen by the many church guests, no matter how bright the stage hand makes the "star of Bethlehem." The good and the bad news of the Christmas Story is very much important to the plot just as it typically is with most stage productions. You have the premise, or the main story line, the conflict, the supposed resolution, the anti-climax, the tragedies, and the final victorious climax. Perhaps we would tire quickly with happy stories that never provided any tension and angst. After all we are all human, are we not. We all like a good bit of drama every now and again. For anyone who says, NO, no more drama for me! There's ultimately great news in this Christmas story.

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**Luke 1:26-38**

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. 33 And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end." Then Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I do not know a man?" And the angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. For with God nothing will be impossible." Then Mary said, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

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Imagine if you will, the Christmas story being played in a present day setting. Joseph, who had graduated from High School the previous year and was working for old man Bartholomew of Bethlehem, though they called him Mister BB. He worked for him in his wood working shop. Mary though was still in High School. Joseph goes to pick up Mary one day from school. He sees her and his face lights up. He knows they will be married once she graduates at the end of the school year. He is excited about their future together. Yet as Mary comes up to him he notices that Mary seems troubled about something. Joseph asks her, "is there something wrong?" Mary says, "I know this is going to sound crazy but I had a visitation from an angel last night." Joseph, who is startled by such a proclamation, coughs a couple of times acting like he is trying to clear his throat buying himself time as he gains his composure so that he wouldn't appear as though he didn't believe her, at least until he heard more. He then replies, "uh, really, wow, tell me more." "Well, as the angel said, "The Holy Spirit will come upon me, and the power of the Highest will overshadow me and the One who is to be born will be called the Son of God." Joseph isn't sure what to make of that. That was one crazy story. Mary and her family were well respected and religious and Mary certainly didn't seem to be delusional up until now. "Mary, I have to admit that is a tough one to wrap my head around." Not much more was said about it as he walked her home. At least he didn't have to worry about it for a while, since they wouldn't be married until sometime next year.

A couple of weeks go by and Joseph asks Mr. BB if he can quit early so he could go pick up Mary from school. Mr. BB says "sure, no problem, you kids have fun!" When Joseph sees Mary coming out of the school, she looks worried again. In fact she looks terribly worried, sad even. Joseph asks, "hey Mary, what's with the sad look?" Mary begins crying, and then after much consoling by Joseph, Joseph asks again, "what's the matter Mary?" She bursts out, "I know you're going to have trouble understanding this Joseph but I think I'm pregnant!" Joseph looks around to see if anyone else heard her. When he feels confident that no one did, he ushers her along far enough away from the school grounds so that they can be alone. They come to a park bench and Joseph helps Mary to have a seat. "Ok Mary, what's this all about?" She cries again, but in the midst of her sobbing she cries, "I don't know, but there are most certainly tell-tale signs that I am going to have a baby! Please don't judge me Joseph, remember how I told you about the angel visitation and what the angel said? I think this is about all that." Joseph replays in his mind what Mary had said of how she was visited by an angel and that she would have a child who is the Son of God. And then now this. He begins thinking of how he can deal with the situation. After all, no one in town will believe such a story, especially knowing that he was having trouble believing it himself.

How this really happened is left to our imagination, but as was read in **Matthew 1:18-25**, that is somewhat how it all played out. Mary had to tell Joseph that she was with child, even though she she had not known a man yet. And, just in the nick of time an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and says that it's all good, that the child is from the Holy Spirit. Just imagine telling that to your neighbors and friends.

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**Matthew 1:18-25**

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ was as follows: After His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Spirit. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly. But while he thought about these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins." So all this was done that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel," which is translated, "God with us." Then Joseph, being aroused from sleep, did as the angel of the Lord commanded him and took to him his wife, and did not know her till she had brought forth her firstborn Son. And he called His name Jesus."

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So Joseph took Mary as His wife, yet since she was with child, they did not consummate their marriage until after Jesus was born, as it says in the Scripture. Just at about the time Mary was getting closer to having the child there was likely some concern with Joseph and Mary. Yeah, sure they were now married, but what will the townsfolk and their friends and their family think if Mary has a baby six months after she was married. Scandal! Headlines in the Bethlehem Bee News, "Joseph the Carpenter: Shames Mary's Family!" We're not told all of the details of the story leading up to the birth of Jesus and we're not given any details involving the parents of Joseph or Mary. But we can imagine at some point, as Mary was gaining in size, that Joseph may have said to Mary, "I don't know if we can keep this a secret much longer. People are starting to say that you must be with twins because you're so big at this stage in your pregnancy." Whether they were forthright with their friends or family or whether they kept it a secret is anyone's guess but we are told she visited her relative Elizabeth. At what could be said was just the right time, Caesar Augustus called for a complete census of the Roman kingdom. So Joseph and Mary saddled up the donkey and from Nazareth, away they went to register in the small town of Bethlehem, since that is where all of those who were of the house of David were to register.

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**Luke 2:1-7**

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.

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From the Christmas Story account in Matthew we know about the angel visitation to the shepherds who were watching their flocks by night and they were told that they'd find Christ the Lord as a "babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger." Then after 8 days, Jesus was circumcised in Jerusalem and then after the time of Mary's purification according to the law which was 40 days for the birth of a son, Joseph and Mary took Jesus to Jerusalem again to present Him to the Lord and to give the customary sacrifice. (**Luke 2:21-22**) Then in Matthew we know of the wise men from the east, bearing gifts, presented to Joseph and Mary gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Then we are told in the Matthew account that an angel of the Lord warned Joseph in a dream not to return right away to their hometown of Nazareth but to flee to Egypt which fulfilled the prophesy in **Hosea 11:1**, "Out of Egypt I called My Son." The gifts of the wise men can be surmised then to have helped Joseph and Mary in their travel expenses and perhaps down the road in providing the funds for Joseph in setting up his own carpenter shop. The wise men were supposed to report back to Herod on the whereabouts of the baby Jesus but they were warned in a dream not to.

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**Matthew 2:16**

Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men.

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While the Christmas Story emphasizes the birth of sweet baby Jesus, the darker side of the story involves King Herod having killed all of the baby boys, 2 years and under in the greater Bethlehem area. After the death of Herod, Joseph was told once again in a dream, to return to Nazareth to where it says in **Luke 2:40**, "And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him." With painstaking detail God ensured that Jesus would grow

up as the Son of God, the Savior of the world, to all who will believe.

Many times what didn't make sense to Joseph and Mary, from her virgin pregnancy to the virgin birth of Jesus, from having to go from Nazareth to Bethlehem to Jerusalem to Egypt and then back to Nazareth to raising of the Son of God, the Messiah, the Christ, the Anointed One of God who would die on a cross for all of our sins, raise from the dead on the third day, and would promise eternal life to all who would believe on Him and then confirmed to us, when He was about to die on the cross, He said, "It is Finished!" It is not up to us to always understand all of what God is doing. As God said through the prophet Isaiah, "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways My ways," says the Lord. "For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are My ways higher than your ways, and My thoughts than your thoughts." We are not expected to have all the answers and know as God knows, but we are called to trust in Him. **Proverbs 3:5-6** says, "Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; In all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths." That is an absolute promise from God! Through the sacrifice that Jesus paid, He took our sins upon Himself so that we can become a new creation in Christ Jesus, if we will just believe! Let us remember what was said to Mary, that "nothing is impossible with God" and "of His kingdom there will be no end."

Just as those in Old Testament times had to wait patiently on the salvation of the Lord, just as the prophets of old longed to see the salvation of the Lord, and just as Joseph and Mary had to trust God and wait on the promise and salvation of the Lord in the soon to be Risen Savior Jesus the Christ, so too must we wait patiently for the full salvation of the Lord, yet it is just up to us to believe what Jesus said-"It is Finished!". The righteousness of God has been revealed to us in Christ Jesus and that we can be saved by believing on Jesus, yet we still wait for the fullness of the promise of eternal life in our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In the words of Jeremiah in **Lamentations 3:22-26**, he says, "Through the Lord's mercies we are not consumed, because His compassions fail not. They are new every morning; Great is Your faithfulness. "The Lord is my portion," says my soul, "Therefore I hope in Him!" The Lord is good to those who wait for Him, to the soul who seeks Him. It is good that one should hope and wait quietly for the salvation of the Lord." My prayer for each of us is in what the Apostle John said to those who believe on our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, "that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full." (**1 John 1:3**) May we all share the "peace and goodwill toward men (and women)" and may you all have a very blessed Christmas in Jesus Christ our Lord.