

The Christmas Story

December 25, 2023

Traditions in the Eyman home on Christmas Day

- Stockings, breakfast, Christmas story, gifts
- Gifts are under a nativity set and not the tree, as a reminder of the greatest gift ever given.
- Today I want to share with you some of the story that my family receives on Christmas day. It has grown some over the years so I call it Christmas Story 3.0.

Christmas Story 3.0

Background on Matthew and Luke

- Who they were and what they did
- This story is accurate to what actually happened

Mary's background

- She was poor, young and devout.
- She sought to honor God by the way she lived her life.
- Her Magnificat reveals her extensive knowledge of Scripture.
- Her selection to carry the Messiah shows the depth of her faith.
- A descendent of king David.

Joseph

- A righteous man, *Tzadikim*.
- He sought to honor God by the way he lived his life.
- A *tehton*. Likely stone mason and handyman working at Sepphoris (about 3.5 miles from Nazareth).
- A descendent of king David.

Nazareth was a small town made up of family and friends. Any deviation from scriptural or societal norms would have been known. Knowing that 30 years later they sought to execute Jesus for claiming to be the Messiah suggests that they were zealous enough to respond to others who may be seen as blaspheming or degrading God.

Matthew 1:18-24

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph,

- Pledged is a betrothal...considered married, all that remained was the ceremony and physical union.

but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly.

- This tells us something about Joseph’s faith. Jesus challenged righteous leaders to search out what the scriptures mean—God desires mercy not sacrifice. The law said that Mary and the man she had a relationship with should be executed for their sin. Joseph understood and sought to offer mercy rather than sacrifice.

²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”

- Mary’s reputation was ruined
- Choosing to go through with the marriage would have ruined Joseph’s reputation too.
- Jesus carried this all His life (“We know who our father is.” Rather than call Him the son of Joseph they asked, “Isn’t this the son of Mary?”)

²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ “The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel”—which means, “God with us.”

²⁴ When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife.

- Both Mary and Joseph surrendered to the Lord’s hand, even when they didn’t understand.

²⁵ But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus. [which means “Salvation” and “The Lord is salvation.”]

Luke 2:1-7

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register.

⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

- That line would have stopped first century readers in their tracks.
- Technically, Mary didn’t have to go too. I think Joseph was protecting her from what the people would say and do while he was gone, or knowingly fulfilling prophecy, or both.

⁶ While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

- This word is usually translated at room (think upper room). There was a word for inn or hotel. Jesus used it in the story of the good Samaritan.

- This word for inn can also mean guest room. Both Mary and Joseph had family in this little town and they were looking for a guest room in one of those homes. The stable was likely a cave next to or within the home, a place of sanctuary for the animals.
- Three miles away was the Herodian, Herod's opulent fortress palace. The contrast between the powerful adult king in the castle and the helpless infant king in the manger is striking.

Luke 2:8-20

⁸ And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.

- Why out in their fields instead of at their pens? This was lambing season. Late December through June. If we take a middle of the road approach we can guess a Feb / March timeframe.
- They were watching over the lambs, many of which would become a sacrifice at the temple.
- Why do we celebrate His birth on December 25? I think the reason is more profound and spiritually honoring than a political attempt to wrest power from a pagan festival.
 - The belief that a prophet died on the same day he was conceived.
 - Jesus' death thought to be March 25 or April 6 (track that nine months out).
 - There is evidence of a Christian festival celebrating Christ's birth on December 25 in 286 AD
 - It may have something to do with the Star of Bethlehem too.
 - Not a simple or political answer, we can't be sure but I think we can be sure that there is more going on than our 21st century Western minds understand.

⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

- Notice that the angel came with the glory of the Lord, God's presence with the shepherds. This was a presence that had not been felt or seen for 400 years. When confronted with God's holy-purity there is but one response: Fear.

¹⁰ But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord.

- Savior, Christ, Lord. He saves us. He is God's anointed one. He is God Himself.

¹² This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

- Not something you see every day. This confirms the angel's words.
- How this is a sign. The newborn lambs (the ones who would one day be sacrifices at the temple) were wrapped the same way to avoid marring them. Did the shepherds see this?

¹³ Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ "Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶ So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷ When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

- Mary treasured and pondered these things.
- The shepherds celebrated the change that was coming.
- What do I do with this news?

Matthew 2:1-2

Matthew gives us the Epilogue of the magi coming from the east. So much can be said here but we have time to just consider the star.

- They saw his star in the east. This was many months ago. Some speculate 9 months.
- His Star. They saw something that the average person did not understand.
- This is an interesting star. It appeared early, was assigned to a king, was only noticed by a trained eye and moved.

We know that our solar system is like a great clock. We've learned how to fast forward it so that we can send rovers to intercept Mars. We also know how to rewind it, to make it run backwards and see where the stars were at different times in history. Long about 3 BC there were some stunning things that could be seen in the sky, things that need to wait for another time.

If current thinking on the star is accurate, and I think it likely is, then that means that when God flung the stars and set the planets into space he put in motion the clock that would announce His Son's arrive "when the time had fully come." At the moment of creation, the Father, Son and Spirit knew what the Son would need to do and so God set the stage to make that happen. Stunning.

And so now the haunting question that has visited every generation visits us today. What child is this?

What child is this?

- He was a life-altering, reputation destroying, dream changing reality to Mary and Joseph
- He was a double-threat to Herod.
- He was a statement of hope and justice to the shepherds.
- He was a fulfillment of expectation to the magi, a reason to uproot and take a long, expensive journey to pay their respects.

Who is He to you?

And this brings me to the last part of our family's Christmas traditions.

- We in the West tend to focus on the date of the birth so that we might be ready on time.
- But those in Jesus' culture were more interested in the details surrounding the birth so that they might not miss the meaning of the time.

By focusing on the day, we may have all our gifts ready. But by making the day our focus, have we failed to receive the one gift that this birth was meant to give?

Years ago I took a plain, brown box, wrapped it in a brown paper bag and tied it with twine. Some years ago the dog bit into it and tore some of the paper. I thought that was appropriate, so I didn't repair it. This plain brown box is mixed among all the brightly colored packages as a reminder of how many gifts God gives, especially the most important one given 2,000 years ago, come disguised with unattractive wrappings.

May we not miss what He offers.

Close in prayer

Like Mary:

- Help us treasure these things
- Help us ponder these things, and what they mean.

Like Mary and Joseph

- Help us surrender more fully to you, no matter what that might mean for the dreams and plans that we have set.
- Set in our hearts the profound reality of this story and let its truth change our lives.
- We choose to receive from you the greatest gift ever given.