

The Christmas Story

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[0 : 00] What are your expectations and hopes going into Christmas this year? Christmas celebrations often look different for everyone.

Some of you will be gathering with family and having big meals together. Some of you will be having a gift-giving time. Depending on the size of your family or gathering, that could be something that either energizes you or excites you, or maybe you're bracing yourself.

Maybe that's somewhat draining to you. Good, but draining. For many, Christmas can be difficult. It can be a painful reminder of broken or strained family relationships.

It can be the time when conflict happens, where arguments break out, harbored bitterness, unforgiveness, grudges can take their toll.

Sometimes the children are all smiles, but there's tension amongst the adults. And then there are those who have lost precious loved ones recently.

[1 : 18] There are those who are far from home. These realities remind us that despite all the anticipation and the buildup, Christmas may not be what we expect or hope.

And all of these celebration dynamics, they change from year to year. But there's one wonderful thing that stays the same, Christmas after Christmas, and year after year, a reason to rejoice, a place for our hearts to rest, and to have peace, no matter what's going on in your life.

And it's the good news that Christ, the Lord, our Savior, has been born. So I want to just briefly tell you the story again.

It's difficult to pick the moment that all of it started. As we've been talking about in our adult Sunday school, God has been writing a grand good news story, and it's barely possible to appreciate this moment of the story without considering all that's led up to it.

Without thinking about why Jesus' coming was so desperately needed. And so do we start with the many human problems of which Jesus is the remedy?

[2 : 46] Or do we start with the many promises made long ago by the prophets? Or do we go back even further than that to before the creation of the world and God's own eternal, unfathomable purposes?

Or do we just start with the first event, recorded in the New Testament? All of these are true and right places to start. And this is why Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy going all the way back to Abraham.

This is why John begins his gospel with an explanation of how Jesus, the Word, was in the beginning, even before this world was created. And this is why Luke begins his account with the first visible sign after 400 years of silence from God.

All of these are true and right places to start. So this Christmas, let's start where Luke started in his account. It all started in the time of Herod, king of Judea, with a priest named Zechariah.

There had been centuries prior to this with no word from God, no prophets. There were some significant moments and even signs that God was still at work to protect and to preserve his people behind the scenes, but no words, no visions, no revelations like in centuries past.

[4 : 16] And then one day, God broke the silence. It all started with a man named Zechariah who was a priest, one of the men who served the Lord at the temple in Jerusalem.

And even though his wife was well past the age of childbearing, meaning that it was biologically impossible for her at this age to conceive, God sent his angel to appear to Zechariah one day during his service in the temple and God's angel told him that he would soon father a son.

And this son to be born would have a very special role in God's plan. This son of Zechariah's would be used by God to bring many people back to the Lord their God and to make them ready for his appearing.

Zechariah, even though he was a righteous, God-fearing man, he doubted this message from the angel and he was made mute because of it.

Six months later, the same angel, Gabriel, was sent to a young woman in the town of Nazareth. And this young woman, of course, was named Mary.

[5 : 38] Mary was a relative of Zechariah's wife, Elizabeth. And Mary was engaged to a man named Joseph, a carpenter.

Gabriel appeared to Mary and told her the most jaw-dropping thing a person could ever hear. I'm going to read it for you right out of the Gospel of Luke.

The angel went to her and said, Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you. Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.

But the angel said to her, Do not be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus.

He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever.

[6 : 51] His kingdom will never end. The angel then explains to Mary how it will happen. Though she has never been with Joseph or with any other man intimately, God's Holy Spirit would do a miracle inside of her causing her to conceive without a human father such that the child to be born would rightly be called the Son of God.

what an astounding word to receive from God. Well, three months later, Zachariah's son was born, little baby John, and another miracle takes place.

Zachariah, who had been unable to speak for nine months, regains his ability to speak and God's Spirit fills him and he begins to speak like the prophets of long ago, a message from God.

And the message is that God's salvation is very near. A king is soon to be born in fulfillment of all God promised long ago through his holy prophets. A great salvation is about to appear.

A forgiveness of sins is about to be known and these will be gifts of God's tender mercy. And little John, the son of Zachariah and Elizabeth, shall be a prophet of God and he will be the one to prepare the way for the Lord by giving people a knowledge of all these things that God is about to do.

[8 : 37] And as you can imagine, this caused quite a stir in the hill country of Judea and everybody was talking about old Zachariah and Elizabeth and their brand new baby boy.

Meanwhile, we don't know the exact timing of things here but there was conflict. There was tension between Mary and Joseph. At some point here, Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant and it causes great struggle in his heart.

he had chosen Mary and no doubt deeply loved her but how could this be that she's pregnant?

Joseph knew that he was not the father of her child and so there must have been a moment in the past little while where she had been with another man. How could she? How long had she known about this before she told him?

We don't know. Did Joseph find out about this before or after Mary went to visit Elizabeth in Judea? We don't know.

[9 : 55] All we know is that Joseph's heart was torn. He was thinking very seriously about calling off his engagement altogether father. And yet he loved her enough that he didn't want to expose her to public disgrace and so he was considering a way of breaking things off with her quietly.

But then that night God caused his angel to appear to Joseph in a dream and God said this to him. We read in Matthew 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.

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.

And so Joseph married Mary and took her home as his wife. Can you imagine what it was like for them to count down the days together until the arrival of this very special child?

And as the days went by we imagine that Joseph and Mary began to make preparations in their home like all first-time parents do and the day was getting closer and closer.

[11 : 28] But then something very unexpected happened. The emperor himself decided that it was time to count all the people in the empire census time.

And this was not the mail-out kind. This was the kind that required Joseph and Mary to make the long trip all the way from where they lived in the north back to their hometown.

A little town called Bethlehem just outside of the big city of Jerusalem. I've been through this four times now and I can tell you when it's getting late into the third trimester you want to stay close to home.

You don't want to be traveling especially not any great lengths. You don't want to be delivering your wife's baby on the side of the road. And these were not the days of automobiles.

These are the days of walking and riding animals and carts. But the census required it and so they made the journey down to Bethlehem.

[12 : 44] Now I'm not saying that this is worse than what the women go through. they have it worse by far. But when it comes to what we men are responsible for in this whole thing, few things are as stressful as figuring out how to help your wife have all that she needs when the time comes for that baby to be born.

I mean if we just knew the exact time that it would all begin and how long each stage of the labor would go, we could just plan, we could make arrangements.

No doubt Joseph tried that night in Bethlehem. But by the plan of God his son, the baby, ended up having nothing better than a feeding trough for his little bed on the night that he was born.

All the guest rooms were taken and where was this manger? Was it out back the inn? Was it at the local stable? Was it out behind the relative's house?

It doesn't say. But that's how it went, the night that God's son was born into this world. The night when our Savior took his first breath with human lungs.

[14 : 20] It was a humble, quiet, and private birth in a lowly place there in Bethlehem. God did choose a very spectacular way to break the news of his son's birth, just not to the folks that we would have expected.

Out in the fields around the town that night there were shepherds guarding their sheep, and God made the birth announcement to them. He lit up the sky for them.

We read about this in Luke's gospel. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, do not be afraid.

I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today, in the town of David, a Savior has been born to you.

He is the Messiah, the Lord. this will be a sign to you. You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.

[15 : 44] This one angel was then joined by countless more, and the shepherds heard them all praising God together and speaking of peace for those on whom God's favor rests.

What an awesome and glorious sight that must have been. Then the sky goes dark again, the angels leave, and the shepherds run into the town in search of the Messiah.

They relay all that they had seen and heard from the angels to Mary and Joseph, and the story goes on from there. This is the Christmas story.

This is the good news that doesn't change, year to year. This is where we find joy. This is where we find peace, no matter what's going on in our lives.

Jesus, our Emmanuel, has come. God has come to be with us. He has sent His Son, the great King of God's coming kingdom, kingdom, the kingdom of heaven, and He is the one who saves us from our sins.

[17 : 06] As we heard in the song, He came to live, to walk, to die, to rise, to reconcile the lost, to bring the Spirit's birth.

love. While there may be some things about Christmas this year that are not exactly what we expect or hope, this good news of how God has sent His Son goes so far beyond what we deserve as sinners.

It makes all the difference. God Himself loves you. And not just a little bit. This thing that He has done in sending His Son proves the immeasurable depths of His love for you and for me.

You are cherished. You are treasured even more than you know or can imagine. for God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son that whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life.

And so rejoice this Christmas. God loves you. Rejoice. Let's pray. Father in Heaven, thank You for this incredible gift which we do not deserve.

[18 : 49] I pray that our hearts would live here in this truth that You love us this much to send Him to come to save us.

it's hard for us to even fathom that You want to be with us, that You love us and desire to have us as Your people, as Your sons and daughters.
What can we do but sing praise to You and thank You? I pray that this truth would just be full in our hearts for the rest of today and tomorrow as we celebrate.
We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.