

The Christmas Story, Part I

An Angel Visits Mary

Narrator: *It is St Luke who tells us the most about the Christmas story. And one of the main characters of the story is, of course, Mary, a young woman who will become the mother of Jesus. The account begins with the appearance of the angel Gabriel to Mary. Gabriel has a special message for Mary-she has been chosen by God to become the mother of Jesus.*

St Luke describes it this way:

Reader: "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'"

Narrator: *Clearly this was nothing that Mary had ever dreamed of. No doubt her hope was that in time she and Joseph would marry and build a home together and live a quiet life. The message of the angel turned that dream all upside down. Perhaps Mary wondered for a moment if she should refuse to cooperate. Surely the Lord God could find another woman to bear the Son of God. But Mary did not refuse the call of God, and as St Luke writes, Mary said:*

Reader: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her."

The Christmas Story, Part II

Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem

Narrator: *St Matthew also tells us about the Christmas story, but from a slightly different perspective. He begins his account by tracing the lineage of Jesus all the way back to King David, and before that, to Abraham. Matthew then describes the turmoil that Joseph underwent once Mary told him of the angel's visit and that she was going to have a baby. But we also hear of how Joseph found peace with Mary's pregnancy.*

Reader: "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be

with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do 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 as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel', which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus."

Narrator: *But the world around us has a way of interfering with our plans. Soon after Joseph reconciled himself to this unexpected pregnancy, the Roman authorities decided to take an inventory, a census, of all the people living in the Empire. This census, or registration, required everyone to be counted in his or her own hometowns, which meant going back to the hometown if you had moved away. St Luke provides us with the details:*

Reader: "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child."

The Christmas Story, Part III

The Birth of Jesus

Narrator: *After a long and tiring journey, Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem, eager to find accommodation. No such luck, for Bethlehem was filled with other travellers, also coming home for the registration. Finally, stopping at an inn, they were allowed to find shelter, not in a comfortable bed inside, but in a stable, surrounded by cows and horses. As St Luke writes:*

Reader: "While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Narrator: *The manger was a long open box that was used to feed the animals. It doesn't get more basic than that, which, of course, is the point St Luke is making. This Jesus, this Son of the Most High, has come into the world to be in complete solidarity with all people, the poor as well as the rich, the sick as well as the healthy, the lowly as well as the mighty. The Holy Family, Mary, Joseph and Jesus, are homeless, like so many who are marginalized or outcasts in society. In time, the message that Jesus will come*

to proclaim speaks of good news to the poor, release to the captives, restored vision and freedom for the oppressed.

The Christmas Story, Part IV

The Shepherds go to the Manger

Narrator: *In fact, the first people invited to see this new baby are not the powerful or the elite; no, they are humble Jewish shepherds, people typically kept from polite society. But they are invited by a messenger of God, an angel, to come see the Holy Child. The glory of this moment is intensified by the appearance of the heavenly host, singing the great declaration: "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!" Hear St Luke's account:*

Reader: In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!'

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The Christmas Story, Part V

The Visit of the Wise Men

Narrator: *St Luke lists the Jewish shepherds as the first group to see and worship the newborn Jesus. For St Matthew, however, the first ones to see the baby are the wise men, who have come from the East. They are the Magi, astrologers who have read the stars in the sky and determined that a great event has taken place. They travel to Jerusalem, and after discussion with a greatly disturbed King Herod, they follow the star to Bethlehem and find the Holy Family. They are aware that they are in the presence of greatness, and they bow down and pay the infant homage. They also offer gifts fit for a king—gold, frankincense which was used in royal ceremonies, and myrrh, used in embalming, thus foreshadowing the death and resurrection of Jesus. This is how St Matthew describes the scene:*

Reader: In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

The Christmas Gospel, Part VI

St John 1

St Matthew and St Luke are the two gospels that speak directly of the birth of Jesus. St Mark, the earliest of the gospels, begins when Jesus was about 30 years old and was baptized by John the Baptist. However, the Fourth Gospel, John's Gospel, asserts that Jesus, the Word made flesh, has existed since the beginning of time as part of the Trinity. Hear this paraphrase of the Gospel according to St John, Chapter One:

Eternal Word,
with God from the beginning,
in whom and through whom everything has come to be,
in you is life, the life that is our light,
the light that shines on in the darkness,
which the darkness has never overcome,
the true light, enlightening us all, shining in the world.
Yet we did not recognize you.
You came to your own people-and we knew you not.
You came to your own home-and we received you not.
But to those who did receive you,
who believed in your name,
you gave power to become your children,
to be known as your servants and your friends,

born not of the will of flesh and blood, but of the desire of your love.
Living Word of Light and Love, you were made flesh.
You came to dwell among us, full of grace and truth.
We saw your glory, divine glory shining through a human face,
as a mother's eyes live through her daughter's,
as a son reflects his father's image,
your glory in a human being fully alive.

Thanks be to God.