



Reading - The Story of Christmas from the Gospel of Luke

Gabriel Comes to Mary

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. ... Then Mary said, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.’ Then the angel departed from them.

The Decree from Emperor Augustus

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. 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.

The Shepherds and the Angels

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!’

The Shepherds visit Mary and Joseph



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.

SERMON

The scripture we have read today comes from the Gospel of Luke. It is a simpler story than the one found in the Gospel of Matthew. In the Gospel of Luke Joseph never considers abandoning Mary. There are no wisemen bearing gifts of frankincense, myrrh and gold, and King Herod’s demand to kill all male infants never happens. In the Gospel of Luke, there is no need to flee to Egypt.

Rather, Mary and Joseph made their way home. As was custom, they circumcised their son at 8 days, and when Mary had completed her time of purification, they brought Jesus with them to the Temple in Jerusalem and made sacrifices according to the Law. When they arrived at the Temple, they met Simeon, an old man, to whom it was revealed that he would not see death before he had seen the Messiah. When Simeon saw Jesus, he knew that this had come to pass and praised God. Similarly, a prophet and widow by the name of Anna began to praise God as well and to speak about the child to all who would listen. As when the Shepherds came to see their newborn son, Joseph and Mary were amazed, that there were so many who had waited for this time to come, and that their tiny son was to be such a gift to the world.

If there was any time that the world needed such a gift, it was surely the time in which Jesus was born. The people of Israel lived under the yoke of Roman rule. Harsh oppression was a fact of everyday life. As in the Book of Isaiah, written when the people of Israel suffered under the captivity of the Babylonians, many yearned for a Messiah, someone who would dramatically break the bonds of oppression that were wounding them so deeply.

It was a time when nothing could be taken for granted, no guarantee that the fruits of your labor would amount to anything, no guarantee that your dignity and worth would be protected, no guarantee that your



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culture and your peoplehood would remain intact, no guarantee that a tiny child would grow into adulthood.

What a leap of faith it would have been to look on a little child and see in that child the promise of freedom. In such uncertain times, how could you count on anything? And yet, that is exactly what Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds and Simeon and Anna were asked to do. When all seemed in chaos, trust in the birth of a fragile child, completely dependent on others for survival. Trust that in that child lies the potential for beauty, truth, peace, and absolute unconditional love.

We too live in uncertain times. War in the middle east and around the world, the growing separation between the rich and poor, environmental degradation, economic uncertainty, security concerns. As this country gears up for a year of election campaigning, it is tempting to look for a Messiah, that one person who will be our salvation.

Many who waited for Jesus hoped that he would save them from their predicament in a flurry of trumpet song and dramatic glory. And yet, that is not the path that Jesus took. As the infant grew into a child, and as the child grew into a young man, a different path evolved. Love one another. Welcome all to the table. Turn the other cheek. Give away all that you have and follow me. Respond to violence not with violence but with peace. His message confused some, angered others, inspired many.

He never became the military and political Messiah many hoped he would be. He was much more than that. He brought a message of salvation that could only become real if each person made it real in their hearts, if each person committed themselves to the way of love and peace. He did not come to single-handedly save us. He came to give us the means to work together to save ourselves – politically, economically, culturally and spiritually. The embodiment of the divine in him was a promise of what could come to each of us were we to become messengers of peace, love and justice.

Even though he never intended to be a political or military Messiah, his message of peace was so dangerous that it cost him his life. When he died, little seemed to have changed for the people of Israel. The Romans still ruled with a heavy hand, and for many it seemed that Jesus’ ministry had been a failure.



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And yet his was not the way of the warrior. His was the way of peace. Peace in the heart. Peace in the hand. Generosity of spirit and unconditional love.

In the story of Jesus, the cradle trumps the cross. Love and vulnerability trump corruption and fear. No evil could overcome the purity of Jesus’ way of peace. It is that seemingly fragile but everlasting truth that we are called to trust in. It is not the Shepherds who now bend over the cradle. It is us.

We are in a time when many raise the walls of fear, when scarcity thinking encourages exclusion rather than inclusion, distrust rather than trust, closed doors rather than open. Many today hunger for simple answers to the complex realities of our world. And yet that is not the answer. Jesus called us to the cradle. He called people to listen to each other in ways they had never dared to listen before. He called on us to ground in the way of peace, and to walk through fear and truly stand in faith with our neighbor.

When we stand with each other instead of against each other, we are in the way of peace. We are as Mary standing before the Angel Gabriel saying, “Here I am.” We are as Joseph on that cold night in Bethlehem, asking, “Is there room at the inn?” We are as the shepherds on the hillside standing beneath the Angels and asking, “Where can we go, to see this child?”

The Christmas Story is about this way of peace. It is opening our eyes to the divine and fashioning the Kingdom of Heaven with our hearts and hands. Recall the words of our opening: Blessed are they who have wisdom enough to know that the kingdom of heaven is very close at hand, and that all may enter in who have eyes to see and ears to hear and hearts to understand.

So as we sing the songs of Christmas, as we contemplate the stories of old, let us anchor the wonder of Christmas into our hearts. Let us enter in a life of faithfulness, a life shaped by the way of peace and love. Amen.