

CHRISTMAS STORY: INTRODUCTION

The Christmas story is found in two gospels, Matthew and Luke. Some things are the same but some things are different too. The main characters – Mary, Joseph and Jesus – are the same. Both stories have to include Bethlehem as the place Jesus is born because that fulfills prophecy. And both stories conclude with the family going up north to settle in Nazareth because this is where Jesus grows up. Both stories also want to stress the importance of Jesus being recognized and confessed as the Messiah. This also means that both stories tell of a mysterious and magical conception. Matthew tells the story from the perspective of Joseph and Luke tells it from the perspective of Mary.

But perhaps, most important of all, both stories are anti-imperial, setting Jesus' family and birth, and therefore God, against those with the power, wealth and influence who also shape the popular culture. How does this relate to the influences that shape our North American culture when it comes to Christmas celebrations today? How can we make our Christmas more gospel and less imperial?

See you next Wednesday evening, 7:30pm. 😊

The Christmas Story in Matthew

Matthew 1. 1-17

Intro: As you read this passage pay attention to the numbers and the names in bold. Why do they matter? What's the meaning?

1An account of the genealogy of **Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.**

2 Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, ³and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by **Tamar**, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, ⁴and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, ⁵and Salmon the father of Boaz by **Rahab**, and Boaz the father of Obed by **Ruth**, and Obed the father of Jesse, ⁶and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the **wife of Uriah**, ⁷and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, ⁸and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, ⁹and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, ¹⁰and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and

Amos the father of Josiah, ¹¹and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

12 And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, ¹³and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, ¹⁴and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, ¹⁵and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, ¹⁶and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of **Mary**, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are **fourteen** generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, **fourteen** generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, **fourteen** generations.

Matthew 1. 18-25

Intro: The main character of this passage is named Joseph. He will be instrumental in ensuring Mary's and their child's safety and survival. What role does another man in the bible named Joseph play in the safety and survival of the Hebrews?

18 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. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But 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. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'²²All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ 'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 2: 1-12

Intro: This account is a replay of the story of Moses who leads the people of Israel out of slavery into freedom. Moses is also born in great vulnerability and his life is also threatened. But whereas the enemy of Moses and the people is the Egyptian ruler Pharoah with his Egyptian advisors and astrologers supporting him, who represents Moses in this gospel story and who represents Pharoah and his advisors? And which side are the astrologers on?

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, '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.' ³When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; ⁴and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

⁶ "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." ' ⁷ Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. ⁸Then 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.' ⁹When 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. ¹⁰When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. ¹¹On 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. ¹²And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2. 13-18

Intro: There are many points of convergence between the story of Moses and the story of Jesus. What's confusing, though, is how the place of danger and the place of refuge is flipped around from one story to the other. Also, who is the bad ruler in this story? And what does this ruler do in both stories? What's the message?

¹³ Now after they had left, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, 'Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there until I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him.' ¹⁴Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother by night, and went to Egypt, ¹⁵and remained there until the death of Herod. This was to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet, 'Out of Egypt I have called my son.'

¹⁶ When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. ¹⁷Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

¹⁸ 'A voice was heard in Ramah,
wailing and loud lamentation,
Rachel weeping for her children;
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more.'

Matthew 2. 19-23

Intro: Moses leads the Hebrews out of Egypt (where they are slaves) into the promised land (which becomes Israel) where they are to live out their freedom. How is this story replayed in the passage below? Are we to believe that in the child Jesus another liberation story is being played out, and that the people need freedom now as they did long ago? What kind of freedom do they need and from what do they need freedom?

19 When Herod died, an angel of the Lord suddenly appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt and said, ²⁰'Get up, take the child and his mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who were seeking the child's life are dead.' ²¹Then Joseph got up, took the child and his mother, and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was ruling over Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And after being warned in a dream, he went away to the district of Galilee. ²³There he made his home in a town called Nazareth, so that what had been spoken through the prophets might be fulfilled, 'He will be called a Nazorean.'

The Christmas Story in Luke

Luke 1. 26-38

Intro: Whereas in Matthew's account of the birth of Jesus, the enemies of the child are the leaders of Israel, Luke's anti-imperial language has a different target – the Roman empire and its elite. And while the enemies of the child in Matthew are morally corrupt, the enemies of the child in Luke are the powerful who use their privilege to subjugate the world with violence and force.

The fact that the main character instrumental in the birth of the messiah of the world in Luke's account is a woman, who is also young and poor, could not be more anti-imperial, pointing to a very different kind of world rule. What's the message? Also, the young woman is named Mary or Miriam in Hebrew. What role does Miriam (Moses older sister) play in the liberation of her people from imperial domination (Egypt then like Rome now)?

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' ³⁴Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' ³⁵The 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. ³⁶And 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. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.' ³⁸Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1. 46-55

Intro: What will happen to those at the top and those at the bottom in a world where power, privilege and wealth are gained by force? And how will this reversal happen? What agenda do our lives and lifestyles serve? How may we better serve the divine agenda envisioned in the child to be born?

⁴⁶ And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
⁴⁸ for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Luke 2: 1-7

Intro: Why do rulers and governments register people and gather their information? One big reason is for taxation purposes? What happens when you live in a state or country where taxes collected are used to line the pockets of the rich and build up the military and government infrastructure to keep you down?

Joseph is originally from Bethlehem, but in Luke's account has already moved up north to Nazareth. Why would anyone leave their home and land to travel to a place far away where they don't know anyone?

Even though Joseph is from Bethlehem, clearly he has no family or resources there. Where do the family have to find lodging? Think about Palestinians being forced to move from place to place to escape the violence and destruction. Where are they supposed to stay?

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

Luke 2. 8-20

Intro: In this account, shepherds are chosen as recipients of an angelic declaration of the epic birth of the Messiah. What does this communicate to the reader?

What is the revelational message they receive? Note the words used: saviour, messiah, Lord, and peace on earth. Are these words random or very deliberately used? What's the message?

Mary pondered these things in her heart, we are told. Why does this matter?

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom God favours!' (those with good judgement, the peacemakers and the lovers)

15 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.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.
