The Christmas Story by Jean Hamilton

**Prayer**

Good morning. I thought I would address something that has caught my attention over the years about the Christmas Story. For me, it seems we get it in ‘bits and bites’, if you will and, depending in which Lectionary Year we find ourselves, we get more, or fewer, details. I’m what is called a ‘detail person’, so I’d rather have ‘all the details’. In that spirit then, I’ve hopefully put ‘all the details’ together, to give us a ‘back story’ if you will, and I’ll try to do it in less than an hour – just joking. (For those of you who want to follow along, I will give the references as I go along. I will also provide a list of the references later.)

We begin with **John 1:1-5**, **“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.”**

In a way, that’s the whole story in five verses. It says that Jesus, the Word, has always been. In the **Micah reading of today, verse 2 says, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.”** Jesus has always been.

We continue and go to **Luke chapter 1.** The whole chapter has 80 verses, which I won’t read; but, I’ll give a synopsis of the different sections.

In **verses 5-25, the birth of John the Baptist is Foretold.** In this section, we read about the priest Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. They’re old and without children. Then when Zechariah is ministering in the Temple, the angel Gabriel appears to him and, of course, Zechariah is afraid; and, the angel tells him, in vs 13, **“Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard.”** Then Gabriel continues and tells him that he and Elizabeth are going to have a son and he will be called John. This is important because Gabriel also tells Zechariah in vs 17 that John’s purpose will be **“to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”** If we continue reading, we learn that because Zechariah did not believe Gabriel’s words he would be silent until John’s birth. Then we read that Zechariah returned home when his time of service was completed. Where was home?

We learn that a bit later but first, we’ll continue with verses 26-38, where we read about Jesus’ birth being foretold, to Mary of course. Gabriel makes another visit, to Nazareth this time, to tell another woman that she will bear a son, and his name will be Jesus. ‘Woman’ is almost stretching it. We know that Mary was a young teenager and maybe it was her youth that allowed her to be more open, and more believing, than Zechariah. In any case, in vs 29 we learn that Mary was nonetheless greatly troubled at Gabriel’s words and wondered at the way he greeted her, **“…you who are highly favoured! The Lord is with you.”(vs 28)**. Gabriel responded to her with the words, **“Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favour with God”**; and, he tells her how this will happen even though she’s a virgin. He also tells her about her relative Elizabeth who is now in her sixth month of pregnancy, and ends with, **“For nothing is impossible with God.”(vs 37).** Mary responds with **(vs 38: “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.”**

Then the angel leaves her and we go on to the next section, verses 39-55, and find out where Zechariah and Elizabeth live: **in a town in the hill country of Judea (vs 39)**, where Mary goes to visit her relative Elizabeth. **It’s believed the village was Ain Karim.** This wasn’t next door**. It would have taken probably from three to five days to make that trip.**  So, Mary probably travelled with other people. When she arrives, the next 15 verses are about Elizabeth and Mary and the unborn baby John who are all Holy Spirit-filled. The **baby leaps** in his mother’s womb at Mary’s greeting, Elizabeth responds **“[I]n a loud voice”** – vs 42-45 **‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favoured, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!”**

**Verses 45-55** are what we know as the **Magnificat**, (My soul magnifies the Lord) a Spirit-filled response from Mary to the Lord. Verse 56 tells us Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home. Have you ever wondered what those three months were like? **Verses 57-66** tell of the birth of John the Baptist and **verses 67-79** are Zechariah’s Spirit-filled response to the Lord called the **Benedictus,** a song of praise to God.

Our next section is from the **Gospel of Matthew, ch. 1:18-25, the Birth of Jesus.** This is the gospel that tells us how **Joseph** responded when Mary came back from her visit to Elizabeth and it was obvious by then that she was pregnant. **(Remember: being ‘pledged to be married’ was like being married but not living together as husband and wife yet).** In v**s 19-21** we read, **“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. 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. 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.” Verses 24-25 say, “When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife. But he had no union with her until she gave birth to a son. And he gave him the name Jesus.**

We go back to Luke 2:1-7 for a more detailed version of Jesus’ birth and why it happened in Bethlehem. The decree issued by Caesar Augustus to the entire Roman world ordered every person to register in his own town. Because Joseph was of the line of David, he had to go Bethlehem, the town of David, to register**, and his wife went with him, on a trip that again would have been least three to five days.** Because of the number of people doing the same thing, when Joseph and Mary arrived at the inn, there were no vacancies. And so Mary gave birth to Jesus, the Creator of the Universe, the Ancient of days, in a barn, and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and placed him in a manger, a food trough for animals.

The Luke narrative is probably the most ‘popular’ one, the one with the shepherds and the angels **(vs 8-20)**, the one that has given Christians around the world a ‘picture’ of what Jesus’ birth was like. But, it doesn’t have the Magi’s visit. We need to go back to Matthewfor that. But, before we do, let’s remember what else Luke tells us about Jesus’ birth and what happens next, that on the 8th day, the baby was circumcised and given the name Jesus. Luke also tells us in vs 22 that **“when the time of their purification according to the Law of Moses had been completed, Joseph and Mary took him to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord,… and to offer a sacrifice in keeping with what is said in the Law of the Lord: a pair of doves or two young pigeons.”** The time of purification after the birth of a son was 40 days.

In vs 25-35, we read about a man named Simeon who “was righteous and devout…and was waiting for the consolation of Israel. The Holy Spirit had revealed to Simeon that he would not die before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. There’s a lovely prayer by Simeon after he saw the infant Jesus at the Temple.

Also at the Temple was the prophetess Anna who, on seeing Jesus, gave thanks to God. Vs 36-38

Verse 39 says, “**When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth.** Luke does not mention the coming of the Magi, the danger from Herod, or the flight to and return from Egypt.

We go back to Matthew 2:1-12 for the visit of the Magi. We don’t know who they were nor how many there were. But we know that when Herod heard about them, he had a secret meeting with them to try and find out exactly where this possible threat of another king might be. Herod told the Magi to go find this king then report back to him, **so that [he] too might go and worship him (vs 8).** So the Magi followed the star to the place where Jesus was. Verse 11 is important: **On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him.”** This verse is important because it refers to a ‘house’ and a ‘child’, not a ‘stable’ and a ‘baby’. We don’t know why Mary and Joseph were still in Bethlehem but it seems they were because, when King Herod realized **“that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi.” Vs 16**

It depends where you get your information to try and find out exactly how many baby boys were killed by Herod, but we know that each one was loved and valued. If I ask you now, “How many died in the Escuminac Disaster?”, I will get a quick answer. Those men and boys were important. They were family and friends. They are not forgotten. The baby boys killed in Bethlehem over 2,000 years ago are not forgotten.

Then we come to **Matthew 2:13-23**, the escape to Egypt for Joseph, Mary and Jesus and their return to Nazareth. Both times, Joseph was told by an angel in a dream what he should do. I remember wondering years ago how they managed to get to Egypt. Where did they get the money. But then I remembered that one gift they had received from the Magi was gold.

No matter which story of Jesus’ birth you read, with or without details, one thing is certain. Jesus is a gift to us, at no cost. We don’t/can’t earn it. Jesus went through an awful lot for us to get it. All we need to do is accept it.

AMEN