

Trusting God in the Christmas Story, Part 1

Luke 1:1-2:20

We're gonna spend some time thinking carefully about the Christmas story from a certain angle and I hope this is an angle that you will appreciate. Go ahead and turn in your Bibles to Luke chapter 2, starting in Luke 2:1. The Scripture says, "In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him swaddling cloths and laid him a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

“And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. And the angel said to them, ‘Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!’ And the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.’ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. When they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

You can stop there. This first Christmas Day, it’s about a 24 hour period of time, the birth of Jesus Christ, the visit of the shepherds. This was the day Jesus was born, the day that the shepherds visited him in Bethlehem.

And we know by comparing Scripture with Scripture that the wise men, they didn’t come until later. Maybe as much as a year or two later when Mary and Joseph were then living in a house. But this nativity scene that we’ve read about here, it involves some characters: Mary, Joseph, Jesus, there’s some common shepherds there, there’s some residents of Bethlehem. Those are the characters who participated in the very first Christmas Day.

The setting for that first Christmas wasn’t a comfortable home. Mary’s labor and delivery happened in a stable where animals slept. Jesus was quite literally, born in a barn. That meant that the room in which he was born, it wasn’t filled with the smells that we typically associate with Christmas that we’ll

enjoy in this coming Christmas Day. They smelled animal odors, farm smells. This poor young couple didn't have the means to enjoy the things that we enjoy at our Christmas celebrations. No fancy foods, no festivities, the simplicity of the setting here, the quietness of mother and child, really the lack of any expectations that first Christmas morning. The scene was set for a very stark interruption, this visit of the shepherds.

The shepherds had just come from the most amazing and the most astounding experience of their entire lives. Their quiet watch in the dark stillness of the silent night, it had been dramatically interrupted by the blinding light of divine glory, by the loud praise of an angelic army. The angelic announcement of Christ's birth, it sent the shepherds scurrying to Bethlehem. They rushed into town to find this child, to see this sign of this Godsent Savior, Christ the Lord, the newborn baby wrapped, though, in swaddling clothes and lying in an animal's feeding trough.

When they finally arrived, that's exactly what they found. Some of the residents of Bethlehem had followed the shepherds. Shepherds been knocking on doors looking around Bethlehem and

their curiosity of the residence had been aroused by this eager relentless search to find this child. And when they all arrived, they heard the most astounding news. The shepherds reported what they had seen and heard out on the fields, a visit from the angel of the Lord. The return of the glory of the Lord to Israel. Get this, after about a thousand-year absence and an angelic host praising God. No wonder these people who heard this news were astonished. No wonder, of course they marveled. Dramatic experiences like that do not happen every day. They don't happen even in a lifetime, especially in a sleepy little town like Bethlehem.

But those who heard the shepherds' report, those who heard the report, they were privileged to hear not just amazing tales of angelic visitation, not just amazing stories about divine glory, bright light, blinding light. They were amazed to hear a message and it's the message there in Luke 2:10 and 11. It was a message, as you read there, of "good news, of great joy that's for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord." The angel of the Lord set the shepherds' expectations about what they would find. And the angel of the Lord gave them a sign to seek, verse 12, "a

baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.” And then suddenly the angel of the Lord was accompanied by a host, an army of angels from heaven in verse 13, praising God, saying, “Glory to God in the highest, on earth peace among those with whom he’s pleased!”

For those who heard that report, whether or not they comprehended the significance of those words, the text really doesn’t tell us. It simply says, verse 18, that “they wondered.” They were amazed by the report. They were all astonished, but Mary, verse 19, “Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” There is a contrast there and it’s between Mary and all the others who heard the shepherds’ report. They were amazed; she pondered.

Let’s back up just a little bit and ponder this, as well. That’s what we need to do is imagine what was going on from Mary’s perspective. Childbirth has to be one of the most intimate and special times in a woman’s life, and a young husband’s life, as well. Mary is there after giving birth and she’s in her quiet birthing room, you might call it. Nothing more than a stable, really, but it was where she had given

birth. This was where she was recovering. Labor, delivery, recovery, all happened in the same room, in a stable. And this is where she expected some measure of privacy. She wouldn't think anything else. But without warning, a small crowd of absolute strangers interrupted and intruded. And this has got to be a bit uncomfortable for her, a bit of an unwelcome intrusion, right?

After some hasty introductions and after hearing the shepherds' report, Mary was not like the others who heard the report. She was not astonished. She's been the subject of an angelic visitation before, so Mary doesn't marvel. She's not swept away in amazement. Instead, her mind gets to work. She starts processing. She starts thinking. Mary starts to gather together in her mind all that she's experienced. The word in verse 19 that's translated, treasured, while she certainly did treasure the things the shepherds said, the idea here is really one of gathering together information. Compiling is probably a good word there. Upon hearing the shepherds' report, Mary started to compile all the data. Mentally, she's gathering together everything she's heard and seen. Everything she's experience, all she's been exposed to. Everything that's been

revealed to her, and she gathered it together because she wanted to think carefully about it.

Mary's attitude of quiet reticence, it may seem a little bit strange at this point. After all, she's just heard some amazing truths revealed about her son lying in that manger from these shepherds. Some commentators describe her behavior at this point with the word brooding. She's brooding over it. Sharp contrast, again, to the outward amazement expressed by the others who heard. From time to time, the historian Luke, he's the human author who recorded this narrative. He writes in such a way as to call attention to certain details. And here this contrast between the amazement of everybody else in the room and the reticent pondering of Mary. While it is a fact of historical record, he's wanting to draw our attention to something of significance here. To us as readers, we're drawn into Mary's meditation. We're drawn into her pondering. We need to think through the significance of all this from her perspective.

Over the intervening two thousand years since the birth of Jesus Christ in Bethlehem, there are layers upon layers upon layers of Christmas tradition. And they've shrouded this scene.

The more recent commercialization of Christmas has certainly aided. It's done its part to cloud the meaning of what happened that morning. So we here today, we want to return to that scene. We want to recapture some of the simplicity, some of the purity and hopefully, also the clarity that comes from Mary's perspective.

Keep in mind what Mary experienced that day wasn't in any way cozy or comfortable. It wasn't enveloped in Christmas cheer. She didn't have a warm cup of eggnog sitting nearby. She had come through a good bit of difficulty, a good bit of trial. Mary lacked the physical comfort and the emotional stability that most new mothers expect and appreciate during such a trying time. It was not easy for her. Mary's joy on that very first Christmas morning, she had joy, no doubt. But it didn't come from physical comfort. It didn't come from personal or material prosperity. Her comfort didn't come from money or status. It didn't come from great food. It didn't come from time with family around the Christmas tree and a warm fire. Her joy was bound up in the message of Christmas, which is, the angels told shepherds this "good news of great joy for all people, all those with whom God is pleased." And certainly Mary is one of them.

If we'll make a similar investment, if we'll consider carefully what Mary endured, the trials of faith that God brought her through. We're also gonna come closer to sharing in the joy of her perspective, which is a long lasting joy, an eternal joy. It's gonna inform our understanding of the Christmas story. It's gonna cause us to rejoice in the deep truths that this story contains. We just need to take the time. And it all started, really, with the visit of an angel to Mary in Luke chapter 1. First point in the outline: Mary trusted God through the facts of the Christmas story. Mary trusted God through the facts of the Christmas story.

What's recorded here in Luke's Gospel, and in other portions of Scripture as well, are, you need to understand this, they are represented as facts. This is not myth. This is not fable. These are historical facts and they call the reader to either believe them as facts or reject them as fiction. But if you ask Mary, and Luke by the way, did ask Mary. She lived these facts and it started with the visit of the angel, Gabriel to Mary's home. Go back into Luke chapter 1, verse 26. Just let's start by reading what happened to her from her perspective. Luke

1:26 to 31. Look at it there, "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!' She was greatly troubled at the saying and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. "The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, you shall call his name Jesus.'" Stop there for a second.

That's the first fact that Mary had to believe. And it was an astounding fact. This is a big deal because Mary was called to believe here in a virgin conception. Not just that, but a virgin conception in her womb. Not only that, but this is the fulfillment of prophetic Scripture. Here in her life, in her womb. In Isaiah 7:14, God gave a sign to unbelieving Israel. And here was the sign, "Behold the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel." We understand Immanuel means God with us. And Gabriel told Mary, you're that virgin. You're the one. Using the same language, he said in verse 31, it parallels Isaiah 7:14, in almost word for word. "Behold, you

will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.”

No one had ever heard of a virgin conceiving, but this is happening to Mary in real time. Here’s what Mary believed, not only believed in a virgin conception, but she believed that she herself was this promised virgin of Isaiah’s prophecy. It seems almost audacious. She had believed that her life would then be the sign of God’s favor upon Israel. She believed that her child would be the Immanuel, the God with us. Mary embraced all those facts by faith. No questions. No hesitation at all. She believed.

A second set of facts Mary had to believe and embrace was regarding the nature of the child to be born through her womb. Look at verse 32. “He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. And Mary said to the angel, ‘How will this be, since I am a virgin?’ The angel answered 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 called holy—the Son of God.’”

Listen, that is the point of Christmas. It’s about the Son of the Most High ascending the throne of his father David, reigning over Israel forever. It’s about the Son of God ruling an eternal kingdom. You simply have to scratch your head and wonder about the origin of the shallow Christmas traditions that really dominate our culture. Santa Claus and toy-making elves. Really? Where did we come up with that? But as Mary is hearing all this for the very first time, the Christmas story to her, it’s about God’s restoration of Israel. It’s about God’s subduing Israel’s enemies. It’s about the ascension of his Messianic king to the throne of his father David. It’s about the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant. It’s about the restoration that’s promised all through the prophets, especially in Isaiah.

Listen, to make this immediately relevant for us, it’s about today’s headlines. It’s about peace in the Middle East. That’s what the Christmas stories about. The Christmas story is about the ultimate peace on earth. It’s about the most fundamental peace on earth starting with the profound level of

personal peace with God. The personal level of salvation from sin. And from there, from every heart that puts faith in Jesus Christ, it finds peace with God through salvation. That peace then extends to the four corners of the earth through the prominence and the dominance of the nation Israel.

As Paul asked rhetorically in Romans 11:15, what does the divine “acceptance of Israel mean if not life from the dead?” Israel right now is rejected, right? Israel is on the outs with God. It’s not gonna be until Israel puts faith in this baby, in this Messiah, that God will come and deliver Israel. But just as God promised Abraham, through Israel, every nation on the earth will be blessed. These are the realities that were converging in Mary’s mind. She was believing God for what he said about her; yes, but also believing God for what he said about the entire nation. This is incredible truth, but she believed it. All the realities that converged in her mind, she believed all of them. Virgin conception, the birth of the Messiah, everything that flowed from that. But there’s more. Gabriel suggested a visit to her formerly barren, older relative, Elizabeth, verse 36.

Mary believed God about that miraculous conception as well. And she went. She affirmed by her actions what Gabriel said in verse 37, "Nothing will be impossible with God." She believed that. As some like to say, if you embrace the God of the Bible, if you embrace the God of Christianity who's fully revealed in Jesus Christ, well, nothing he says or does is hard to believe, is it? He is indeed the God of the impossible. You embrace him, everything he says makes sense. When Mary visited Elizabeth, she heard amazing things there in that home. Prophetic utterances from Elizabeth. She heard profound prophecy from her formerly silenced husband, Zechariah the priest. Even out of her own song, her own words of song inspired by the Holy Spirit, truths came forth. Mary believed it all. As Elizabeth said, Luke 1:45, "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord."

Mary believed. And as incredible as it all sounded, she embraced everything because Mary trusted the God who revealed the facts of the Christmas story. She believed him. She took him at his word. And that is exactly what God calls us to do, as well. If we're going to enter into Mary's perspective, if we're gonna contemplate what she contemplated on that first Christmas

Day, if we're gonna ponder what she pondered, we need to believe the facts that she believed. We need to have the attitude, the orientation of trust that she had in a God who reveals truth. And listen, you don't pick and choose which facts that you'll accept. This is an all-or-nothing proposition. This is a question of supreme authority.

We either trust the God who revealed the facts, or we reject 'em. To reject one of the truths he revealed is to reject him entirely. Psalm 138:2 says, "You have magnified your word according to all your name." You know what that means? That means that the truthfulness of God is on par with the nature, or the name, or the character of God. They are inextricably linked together. You cannot separate them. You cannot reject the one without rejecting the other. To reject the part is to reject the whole. But on the other hand, embracing the whole means you embrace every individual part, as well. Trusting God's Word means trusting God. It means trusting his character. It means believing in his name. What he says is tied to who he is.

Miraculous events, predicted prophecy, biblical history, God intends us to believe all of it; every single fact. And when

we do, we embrace the God who revealed all the facts. Every single one. And those who trust in him will not be ashamed. They will never be disappointed because God is faithful and true. So Mary trusted God through all the facts of the Christmas story and that's what we do as well. All who belong to God believe the facts that he revealed.

Mary's faith is truly exemplary, walking through this whole thing, she trusted God implicitly. She teaches us to cling to God particularly in the things we don't fully understand. At every point, with every one of God's people, Mary's no exception, God is going to test the faith of every single believer. You can count on it. He creates an uncomfortable tension. He creates a bit of a crisis, and he expects it to press us, to stretch us, always forcing us to ask and answer the question, will I believe him or not? Do I trust him?

For us believers the answer is absolutely! We've entered into a relationship with God through the child of the Christmas story. And it begins with putting our faith in this Savior, who's Christ the Lord. That's how we trust God through the Christmas story. Let's pray together.

Father, we are so grateful that you have sent the one we've read about in Luke chapter 2. We're so grateful you've sent Jesus Christ to be our Savior and our Lord. He's the Savior who is the perfect lamb, slain before you for the sacrifice that you except for our sins, the only sacrifice, by the way. There's no other name under heaven by which we may be saved than the name of Jesus Christ.

We put our faith in him, being forgive of all of our sin because you punished him instead of us even though we deserved it. And then you raised him from the dead, approving that sacrifice and you then put, for everybody who puts their faith in Jesus Christ, you cover them with his perfect righteousness. He's completely approved, he's completed accepted before you. He is the one in whom you are truly pleased, Father. And because of him, because we are united to him in faith, you're pleased in us, too. Not because of anything we've done, not because of anything that we are.

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In fact everything that we are and everything that we've done merits your wrath, eternal separation from you in hell. But you don't give us what our deeds deserve. You cover us in your love and you cover us in Christ. Thank you for that precious gift this Christmas. Help us to meditate on that meaning and join Mary in gathering all these facts together that we've learned, putting them altogether, connecting all the dots, treasuring them up in our heart and help us to ponder and meditate so that we might worship and praise, in joy, in faith, in full understanding. We give ourselves to you completely this Christmas in Jesus' name, amen.