

The Christmas Story

Zechariah and Elizabeth

From Luke 1:1-25

In the days when Herod was king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah. His wife's name was Elizabeth and they were both honorable and morally upright people who did their best to serve God by obeying all of his commandments and regulations without exception. Elizabeth had never been able to have children and both she and Zechariah were starting to get old.

Both of them were descended from Israel's original High Priest, Aaron, and Zechariah belonged to the priestly division that was descended from a man named Abijah.

Every so often those belonging to the division of Abijah would have the obligation to serve in the temple. It was during one of these times that Zechariah's name was drawn to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense.

When the time came, a large group of worshipers gathered outside of the temple and Zechariah went inside to burn the incense. He busily set about to complete his assignment when suddenly an angel of the Lord appeared just to the right of the altar of incense. The angel startled Zechariah so much that he was nearly paralyzed with fear.

“Don't be afraid Zechariah,” the angel said gently. “God has heard your prayers. Your wife Elizabeth is going to have a son and you are to name him John. He will bring happiness and pleasure to both of you and many people will rejoice that he was born. He will be great in God's eyes and will not drink wine or any other alcoholic drink. He will be filled with the Holy Spirit from the moment of his birth and will lead many of the people of Israel back to God. He will go ahead of the Lord in the spirit and power of Elijah to turn the hearts of fathers back to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of living in obedience, to create a nation of people ready to serve the Lord.”

“How can I believe any of this is going happen?” Zechariah responded with wonder. “I am an old man and Elizabeth is now getting older too.”

“My name is Gabriel,” answered the angel. “I stand in the very presence of God. I have been sent to tell you this good news but since you didn’t believe me, you will not be able utter a sound until the time comes when my words are fulfilled.”

By the time Zechariah came out of the temple, he discovered that the people had begun to worry about how long he was taking. He tried to explain what had happened but found that he couldn’t speak. He tried to make signs to get through to them, but the best they could grasp was that he had seen vision.

When the time of Zechariah’s priestly service was over, he returned to his own little town in the Judean countryside, to his wife Elizabeth and his own house.

Not very long after this Elizabeth discovered she was pregnant and went into hiding where she remained for five months. She said to herself, “The Lord did this for me. He has shown me his favor and taken away my shame among these people.”

The Angel Visits Mary Too

From Luke 1:26-38

This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about:

When Elizabeth was in her sixth month of pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to a young woman in Galilee. Her name was Mary. She had never been touched by a man, but she was engaged to a man named Joseph who was descended from King David. When Gabriel appeared to her, he said, “I have some exciting news for you Mary. You are honored above all other women, for God is with you.”

His appearance startled Mary and she was puzzled by his unusual greeting. Gabriel continued softly, “Don't be afraid Mary, you have found favor with God. You are going to become pregnant and give birth to a Son. You are to give him

the name Jesus. He will be highly exalted and will be called the Son of the living God. The Lord God will place him on the throne of his ancestor David and he will rule over the nation of Israel forever. His kingdom will never end.”

“How will this happen?” Mary asked, “Since I am a virgin.”

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you,” Gabriel replied, “And the power of God will sweep over you. Then the Holy One that will be born of you will be called the Son of God. Your cousin Elizabeth is also going to have a son. The one that people said would never have a child is now in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.”

“I am a servant of the Lord,” came Mary's quick response, “May all of your words come true just as you have spoken them.”

Then the angel left her.

Mary Visits Elizabeth

From Luke 1:39-56

Mary then decided to go visit Elizabeth. She left her hometown of Nazareth and traveled to that little town in the Judean countryside and the home of Zechariah and Elizabeth.

As she entered the house and greeted them, Elizabeth's baby immediately jumped within her and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. Suddenly she proclaimed:

“You are extremely favored among women
and the child you are going to have will be exalted!”

“But why am I so honored that the mother of my Lord should visit me?” She asked Mary. “As soon as I heard your greeting my baby leaped for joy. Blessed is the one who believed that what the Lord said to her would happen.”

Then Mary began to speak:

“My very soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord
and my spirit delights in God my Savior.
He knew about me even though
I am nothing more than a servant girl.

From now on all generations are going to call me blessed.
He who is so powerful has done a tremendous thing for me
and his name is holy.

His mercy is given to everyone
from every generation who honors him.

He has shown the strength of his arm and he has scattered
the arrogant in the confused imagination of their own minds.

He has brought rulers down off of their thrones
and he has exalted the humble.

He has filled those who were hungry with good things
and sent the rich away with empty stomachs.

He rescued his servant Israel when in his compassion,
he remembered his promise to Abraham and his
descendants.”

Mary decided to stay with Elizabeth until after John was
born.

The Birth of John

From Luke 1:57-80

The big day finally arrived and the news spread quickly
around the Judean countryside that Elizabeth had given birth
to a son. Her friends and relatives were thrilled and they
knew that God had been very kind to Elizabeth.

When the baby was eight days old, the Jewish religious
leaders of their town came to circumcise him. It was Jewish
custom that babies were officially named on that day and the
leaders were going to name him Zechariah after his father.

Elizabeth quickly spoke up. “No, his name is going to be
John.”

“You don’t have any relatives with that name,” they
countered.

They turned and asked Zechariah what he wanted to
name the baby. He motioned for them to bring him a writing
tablet. He wrote, “His name is John.” The religious leaders
were astonished.

Suddenly Zechariah was able to speak and he was filled
with the Holy Spirit and began to prophesy:

“Praise the Lord the God of Israel
because he has come to redeem his people.
He raised up a horn of salvation for us
from the house of his servant, David, just as it has been
spoken from the beginning by God's holy prophets.
That we will be saved from our enemies
and all those who hate us and
will receive the mercy that was promised to our father
Abraham. And when we are delivered from all of our enemies
we will be able to serve God without fear for the rest of our
lives.

And you, my son, are going to be
called a prophet of the Most High
because you are going to go before the Lord
to prepare the way for him.

Teaching his people about salvation
by having their sins forgiven
by the loving compassion of God,
who is sending us the New Dawn from heaven
to shine on those living in darkness
and to lead us to a path of peace.”

Zechariah's neighbors were totally amazed. All throughout Judea people were talking about the things that had happened. Everyone who heard about it wondered what God was going to do with this child because they knew God's hand was on him.

John grew up with an extremely strong spirit. He lived in the desert until the time came for him to preach to the people of Israel.

The Birth of Jesus

From Matt 1:18-25 and Luke 2:1-7

Now that John had been born, Mary knew it was time for her to return home to Nazareth. By this time it had become obvious that she was pregnant, so Joseph, being an upright and ethical man decided to divorce her quietly and not expose her to public humiliation.

As he was considering this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and told him, “Joseph, son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife. The child she has conceived is from the Holy Spirit. She is going to have a son and you are to give him the name, *Jesus* (Savior), because he will save his people from their sins.”

When Joseph awoke, he did what the angel had told him to do. He took Mary home with him as his wife but she remained a virgin until after she had given birth to a son.

The time was fast approaching for the baby to be born when a command came down from Augustus Caesar himself that a census of the entire Roman Empire should be taken. Each person was to return to the town of their ancestors to be registered. Since both Joseph and Mary were descended from David, they were to go to Bethlehem, which was also known as the City of David.

By the time they arrived in Bethlehem, it was already bustling with activity. The local inn and every other room in town that could be rented had been taken. The only place they could find to stay was a stable. When the time came for the baby to be born, Mary gave birth to a son. She dressed him and wrapped him in a newborn baby blanket and laid him in a feeding trough.

All this had happened to fulfill what had been written by the prophet Isaiah, “*A virgin will be with child, and will have a Son; they will call him Emmanuel*, which when translated means ‘God with us’.”

A Visit from Some Shepherds

From Luke 2:8-20

That evening in the countryside outside of Bethlehem some shepherds were watching over their flocks. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared right in front of them. The glory of the Lord was shining all around them and they were completely terrified.

“Don’t be afraid,” the angel said calmly. “I am bringing you some very good news that will bring tremendous

happiness to all of mankind. A savior was born for you tonight in the city of David, and he is the Messiah. You will be able to recognize him because he is wrapped in a new born baby blanket and laying in a feeding trough.”

Suddenly a great throng of angels appeared and began to sing:

**“Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace and goodwill to everyone.”**

When the angels had finished singing and gone back up into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Come on, let’s go, we need to get into town and find this baby the angel was telling us about.”

So they set out on the run and when they got to Bethlehem, they found Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in a feeding trough just as the angel told them they would.

After they left the stable, they told everyone they ran into what they had seen and what the angel had told them. Everyone who heard their story was astonished and it spread quickly all over the surrounding area. As the shepherds returned to their flocks they were praising and honoring God for all they had seen and heard.

The Baby Jesus is Presented at the Temple

From Luke 2:21-40

When the baby was eight days old, Mary and Joseph had him circumcised as was required by Jewish custom. He was officially given the name Jesus at that time, just as the angel had instructed them to.

According to Jewish law, when a baby boy was forty days old, his mother had to bring a sacrifice of a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons to the Temple in Jerusalem and go through a purification ceremony. The law also stated that if a first born child is a boy he would be set apart as dedicated to the Lord.

When that time came, Mary and Joseph took Jesus and set out for Jerusalem. There was an old man living in the city

named Simeon. He was a very faithful follower of God and had been promised by God that he would see the Messiah before he died. That day the Holy Spirit told him to go up to the Temple and when Mary and Joseph arrived with the baby, Simeon knew immediately that this was the one God had told him about. He went over to them, took the baby in his arms, and worshiped God, “Lord, you can now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word. For I have seen your salvation that you have prepared for your people with my own eyes. He will be a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles and the glory of your people, Israel.”

Mary and Joseph were amazed at what Simeon was saying.

But Simeon continued, “Listen to me, this child is destined for the rise and fall of many in Israel. Many will speak against him and the thoughts of many will be revealed. Then he looked directly at Mary and said, “It will be as though a sword pierced your own heart as well.”

There was an old woman at the temple who overheard what Simeon told them. She had been married for seven years when she was young, and had now been a widow for eighty-four years. She was from the Israeli tribe of Asher and the daughter of a man named Phenuel. She never left the temple and fasted and prayed day and night. The people considered her a prophetess and she went around telling everyone who would listen what Simeon had said about the baby Jesus.

When Mary and Joseph had completed their ritual, they returned to Bethlehem and to the house they had found to stay in.

Visitors from the East

From Matt 2:1-12

About eighteen months after all this had taken place some men arrived in Jerusalem looking for the child that had been born king of the Jews. They were philosopher-priests called Magi, who said they had seen a new star appear that

had signaled the coming of the Jewish Messiah. When they first saw the star they had begun their long journey from their home in the Far East and now had come to Israel to find the one that fulfilled the ancient prophecies.

When the King of Judea, Herod, heard their story he was very upset, and when the king was upset, all Jerusalem was upset. King Herod called together all of the Jewish chief priests and teachers of the law to find out where the Messiah was supposed to be born.

“He is going to be born in Bethlehem,” they answered. “The scriptures say: *‘But you Bethlehem, in the land Judah are by no means the least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will shepherd my people, Israel.’*”

Then Herod secretly called the Magi in to see him. He asked them the exact time the star had appeared and then let them know what the religious leaders had revealed to him. He instructed them to go and find the child and report back to him so he could come and worship him as well.

So the Magi set out again and the star went ahead of them and stopped over the house that Mary, Joseph, and the baby were living in. The Magi got very excited and went into the house and worshiped the child. They opened their packs and gave him gifts of gold, and spices called frankincense and myrrh.

That night the Magi were warned in a dream not to return to Herod. So they got up and returned to their own country by a different route.

Escape to Egypt

From Matt 2:13-18

After they were gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream and said, “Get up now, take Jesus and his mother and escape to Egypt. King Herod is going to try and find the child in order to kill him. Stay there until I tell you it is safe to return.”

Joseph did exactly as the angel told him. He got up that very night, woke up his family, and while it was still dark they all left for Egypt. They stayed there until after the death of Herod.

This fulfilled what was written by the prophet Micah: “*Out of Egypt, I called my Son.*”

When King Herod realized that the Magi had outsmarted him, he was furious. He gave orders that every boy child in Bethlehem less than two years old should be killed. He chose that age because of what the Magi had told him about when the star first appeared.

When soldiers went and carried out the gruesome orders of the king, another ancient prophecy was fulfilled. This one from the prophet, Jeremiah:

*“A voice is heard in Ramah,
weeping and great mourning,
Rachel weeping for her children
and refusing to be comforted,
because they are no more.”*

Return to Nazareth

From Matt 2:19-23

A few years later, after the death of Herod, the angel appeared to Joseph again. “It is safe for you to take your family back to Israel now,” he said. “The one who was trying take the child’s life is now dead himself.”

So Joseph packed up his family for the last time and returned to the land of Israel. When they arrived, they heard that Archelaus was ruling in Judea in place of his father Herod. Having been warned in a dream once more, he decided to return to Galilee and his home town of Nazareth.

Young Jesus Speaks With the Teachers

From Luke 2:41-52

Every year Mary and Joseph took their family to Jerusalem to celebrate Passover. When Jesus was twelve

years old, they made their trip as usual, but this time when it was time to come home, he decided to stay in Jerusalem. Mary and Joseph were unaware of this and set out for home thinking he was with some of their friends and relatives who they were traveling with. They had gone some distance when they found out he wasn't with them, and they headed back to Jerusalem in a panic. They searched frantically for three days before finally finding him in the temple courts sitting among the teachers. He was listening to them and asking questions and all those who heard him were amazed at his understanding.

When his parents saw him, they were astounded. "I can't believe you would do this to us!" Mary exclaimed. "Your father and I have been looking everywhere for you! You scared us to death!"

"Why were you looking for me?" He asked in amazement. "Didn't you know I would be about my Father's business?"

Mary and Joseph did not understand at all what he was saying but he got up and went with them. They all returned to Nazareth together and he was obedient to them from that time on and grew in wisdom and stature and favor with both God and men.