

Another Look at the Advent Stories



By Michelle Ule

Another Look at the Advent Stories is a collection of blog posts I wrote at Christmas 2014 after more than 30 years of teaching Bible studies. I hope you will gain as much surprising joy from these reflections on a story we all know so well, as I did.

You can read all my blog posts at my website: www.michelleule.com

Merry Christmas.

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Zacharias and the Angel by William Blake

Christmas: God on Earth in a Baby; the First Time



*Adoration of the Shepherds by
Gerard van Honthorst*

I grew up in a secular family for whom Christmas was an event featuring a holiday scene across the mantle, a tree hauled into the house on my father's birthday and Coke in the stocking found leaning across the hearth Christmas morning.

When we got older, we attended a perfunctory mass on Christmas Eve, joined a big party at a friend's house and awoke the next morning to presents and an hour-long trip to Grammy's house.

We're Sicilian. We had pasta for Christmas dinner and always chocolate pie for Joan. The Christmas I was fifteen, however, my attitude changed.

Shocked to realize the babe in the manger was really the Creator of the Universe purposefully limited to the body of an infant, I began to reconsider Christmas details. While I naturally was familiar with Jesus, until that 1972 Christmas, I never actually KNEW Jesus.

The glorious musical canon proclaimed at Trinity Lutheran Church in San Pedro, California, drew me to the congregation. I had never "worshipped" in a service where folks broke into four-party harmony and sang with such gusto. As a small church with a homey wooden interior, Trinity Lutheran had an intimate, warm feel.

But at the center was Jesus. He just seemed more accessible to me the way these Lutherans told the story.

"Oh, come. Oh, come, Emmanuel—God with us." I hadn't known the meaning of the name Emmanuel. "God with us rang" in my ears—a soul awakening to the notion the baby in the manger wasn't just a story but the changer of the world who ransomed me away from the sin that bound me to a life of unease.

Jesus' birth, life and death seemed more significant the more time I spent with people who actively sought to know Jesus and to read what the Bible said about him.

That Christmas I heard new carols—as well as Handel's Messiah for the first time. My heart soared with the words. Even today, the chorus of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing," shimmers with a joy. I remember the piney smell of evergreen wreaths mixing with the rosy scent of candles lit to celebrate birth. The Advent wreath symbolized a church body looking forward to salvation and rejoicing along the way.

And there in the middle, the focus of all, was Jesus.

Confounding all mankind with the simplicity of his birth, the humility of his coming and the promise of redemption.

I staggered all through that first Christmas alive to the Gospel. Everywhere I turned, the halos shown, the angels sang, the shepherds celebrated.

And so did I.



Adoration of the Baby by Appaches

Advent: Zacharias and the Angel



Angel Gabriel by Giotto

Zacharias met the angel Gabriel—as found in Luke 1—and history was changed.

Advent arrived.

Somehow over the years, I'd missed several interesting aspects of this event.

Let's start with the first: who were Zacharias and his wife Elizabeth?

The both were members of the Aaron line—the family of priests.

In 4 BC, which is when this event probably took place, Zacharias would have been familiar with the Torah and Elizabeth probably was as well. Zacharias could read and write, as noted in the text. Most priests lived ordinary lives in their small towns.

They lived in the hill country of Judea, an area that stretches basically from Jerusalem in the north to Hebron in the south—in the hills. No surprise, Bethlehem is in the hill country. You can view the area on this map.

“They were both righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless. But they had no child, because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well advanced in years.”

This was at a time when a barren woman was considered cursed by God.

What did Zacharias' priesthood mean?

Many priests lived in Israel at the time, numbers run between 8,000 up to 20,000. With so many, they were divided into 24 divisions. Abijah's division was the eighth in a twice-a-year rotation to serve at the main temple in Jerusalem.

Twice a year divisions journeyed to Jerusalem for one-week service in the temple. Some eight priests served for the two daily sacrifices—one in the morning and one at night. Lots were thrown to determine which priest would get which task. It was a once in a lifetime experience to be given the opportunity to burn the incense offering to God.

As a righteous man who loved God at a time when the priesthood was riddled with corruption, Zacharias undoubtedly felt honored when the lot came for him to offer the sacrifice.

The priests entered the temple into the Holy Place, separated from the most sacred spot—the Holy of Holies—by a thick “veil.” They set about their assigned tasks individually, and once finished the next priest entered.

According to the Mishnah, crowds of worshippers waited outside. The priest who kindled the incense offering would exit and bless the people once their sacrifice rose to God—their prayers rising up to God like incense.

What's the story on the angel?

“So it was that while he was serving as priest before God in the order of his division, according to the custom of the priesthood, his lot fell to burn incense when he went into the temple of the Lord.

And the whole multitude of the people was praying outside at the hour of incense. Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing on the right side of the altar of incense. And when Zacharias saw him, he was troubled, and fear fell upon him.”

On this great moment in Zacharias' life—a life that lacked the joy of children—he entered the Holy Place and kindled the fire in a hushed and quiet space. He was all alone.

Except, then he wasn't.

How startled would you have been to look up and suddenly see someone who definitely shouldn't have been there, had no way of getting in and probably looked different than anyone you had ever seen before?

“The angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zacharias, for your prayer is heard; and your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you shall call his name John. And you will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth.”

What prayer was heard? The praise of God when Zacharias offered the incense?

A good and worthy sacrifice, acceptable to God, but what about the other half of that clause? Weren't Zacharias and Elizabeth being given the desire of their hearts? A child?

Like any good angel—this is how you know it's an angel I've always told my children—he tells Zacharias to “fear not.” Notice he calls him by name.

If you were Zacharias, what would you conclude?

There's more:

“He will also be filled with the Holy Spirit, even from his mother's womb. And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

Zacharias was an educated priest. He couldn't miss the importance of that reference to Elijah.

It had been 400 years since God had spoken through a prophet. Among the last words were these, from Malachi 4:5:

“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet/ before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord.”

The angel just told Zacharias that the Messiah was coming and the child his wife soon would carry would be the forbearer, pointing the children of Israel to their coming Messiah.

The angel then introduced himself. His name was Gabriel, which means “power of God.” Zacharias’ response. What would you have done?

As one commentary noted, “His age spoke more loudly to him than God’s promise.” He blurted out a logical question in that time before assisted reproduction techniques: “how can this possibly be?”

For that lack of faith, Gabriel told him he’d be mute—and so he was.

Outside, the crowd grew restless—what had happened to the priest?

“But when he came out, he could not speak to them; and they perceived that he had seen a vision in the temple, for he beckoned to them and remained speechless.”

They all knew something was up, but what?

The answer came nine, maybe ten months later. Silent the entire miracle pregnancy, when it came time to name the baby—everyone assumed he would be called Zacharias—Zacharias was given back his speech.

“And he asked for a writing tablet, and wrote, saying, “His name is John.” So they all marveled. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue *loosed*, and he spoke, praising God.”

What is significant to me, and what I’ve missed for years is the next sentence:

“Then fear came on all who dwelt around them; and all these sayings were discussed throughout all the hill country of Judea. And all those who heard them kept them in their hearts, saying, “What kind of child will this be?” And the hand of the Lord was with him.”

The people who lived around Jerusalem recognized something miraculous had occurred.

They discussed it all over the countryside. They had to be waiting and watching, wondering what God was up to.

Given that, did Jesus really come into the world in an insignificant way?

Advent: Elizabeth and Mary



Visitation by Mariotto Albertinelli

The Advent story, of course, includes not one but two surprise pregnancies: that of Zacharias' wife Elizabeth and her kinswoman Mary.

Once Zacharias returned from the shocking visit by the angel Gabriel while he served his once-in-a-life time offering at the Jerusalem temple, he knew his past-childbearing-aged wife, Elizabeth.

Just as Gabriel predicted, Elizabeth became pregnant.

She went into seclusion and stayed that way for six months.

That may have been to ensure the viability of the pregnancy, to make sure it was real, and to deal with the awe that what Elizabeth had dreamed for so long had come true.

For six months she remained at home. When she emerged, there would have been no doubt in the minds of her neighbors that she was pregnant.

Shocking!

One hundred miles to the northwest near the Sea of Galilee, her young kinswoman Mary also was visited by the angel Gabriel. Her story is told in Luke 1, as well.

Elizabeth and her pregnancy played a crucial role for the teenage Mary when she took in just what the angel said to her:

“Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus. ³² He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David. ³³ And He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end.”

As with Zacharias' encounter with Gabriel, he told her not to be afraid and made his announcement.

Throughout Luke 1, Mary demonstrates admirable knowledge of the Old Testament. She knew about the promised Messiah and when Gabriel told her the unexpected child's name, “the Lord saves,” she knew the baby was the Messiah.

Quite a bit to take in.

This glorious announcement, using all the names of God, would have been challenging to comprehend, but apparently a practical girl, she went to the most pertinent question: “how?”

“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Highest will overshadow you; therefore, also, that Holy One who is to be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Now indeed, Elizabeth your relative has also conceived a son in her old age; and this is now the sixth month for her who was called barren. ³⁷ For with God nothing will be impossible.”

Mary knew Elizabeth. She knew Elizabeth was old and barren, well past the age of having a child. Given the angel’s words, it’s probably Mary did not know her kinswoman was pregnant.

Mary did know her Old Testament, and stories of other barren women made pregnant. Given the unexpected pregnancies of those women, could God not work a miracle in her own womb?

Elizabeth’s pregnancy confirmed God at work in amazing ways and possibly gave her confidence. Her next words were straight to the point:

“Mary said, “Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.”

She then traveled to see Elizabeth.

Elizabeth and Mary meet

Some have conjectured Mary traveled to the Judean hill country to avoid an honor killing by her betrothed Joseph and his family.

I’m not so sure about that.

Gabriel said the Holy Spirit would come upon Mary and she would become pregnant, but did not indicate when that would happen.

It’s interesting nothing is said about Mary’s family in the text—how they reacted, in particular.

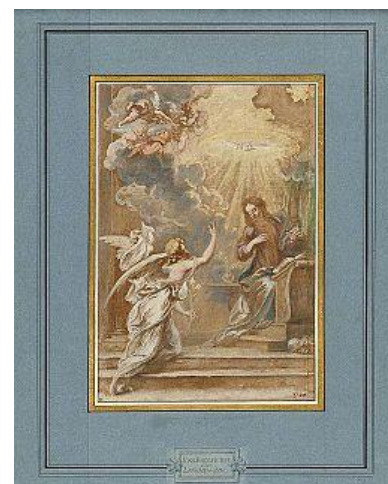
While a trading route frequented by Gentile merchants and Roman soldiers did pass through Nazareth, a young woman is unlikely to take off by herself to visit relatives. Someone probably escorted her, though the text indicates she went to Elizabeth very soon afterwards.

Would Elizabeth have known she was coming and why?

Who knows?

When she entered Elizabeth’s presence, however, several things happened to reconfirm Gabriel’s words.

As soon as Mary’s greeting sounded in Elizabeth’s ears, “the babe leaped in my womb for joy.”



The Annunciation by Jan Boeckhorst

Six and a half months into a pregnancy, Elizabeth would already have been feeling her child's movement. Elizabeth recognized this was different and characterized the baby as leaping for joy *at Mary's words*.

Mary could see, and now had been told, the truth: Elizabeth was pregnant with a viable child, just like the angel told her.

But then Elizabeth, no doubt powered by the same Holy Spirit that would overtake her husband's tongue in 10 weeks, confirmed what Mary had been told:

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!"⁴³ But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?"

Mary would not have looked pregnant. How Elizabeth have known unless God revealed the truth to her?

Why would Elizabeth have called the young unmarried woman the mother of her savior?

I love how God confirmed for Mary the truth of what an angelic being had told her. Mary accepted Gabriel's words, but the confirmation by Elizabeth must have encouraged her even more.

God would demand much of Mary over the course of her life. I'm gratified that he gave her a godly kinswoman to encourage her and help her with both the practical and spiritual aspects of her suddenly changed state.

Advent is about God reaching down and meeting people, real people, in their circumstances—so he could provide the Savior of their souls, and ours.



Statue of the Visitation in the Church of the Visitation, Israel
Photo by Deror Ari

Advent: Mary's Challenging Year



St. Joseph Seeks Lodging in Bethlehem

Christmas is about Jesus, but it would not be celebrated without the faith, determination and joy of a young woman named Mary.

You know that.

Mary was probably about 14, living in the hill country southwest of the Sea of Galilee when a most unexpected event occurred: an angel appeared to her.

We discussed the incident in detail in my post about Elizabeth and Mary, but I've been marveling at the aplomb with which this young woman reacted.

It's important to note a fourteen year-old was a mature young woman in that time and place. She would have been well versed in the stories we now find in the Old Testament, knew how to care for a home and was preparing for marriage to a devout man named Joseph.

Nothing about her in the text indicates an extraordinary woman, other than the mention she had "found favor with God."

Think of it, though. God chose her to be the mother of his child.

God looked through all the course of history and determined this young woman could best rear his son/himself in the humanity of man—to know what it meant to learn to walk, eat vegetables, memorize Torah and prepare for his father's business.

She and Joseph also provided him with siblings, so Jesus, God, grew up knowing what it meant to share.

The challenging first nine months

But the first nine months, her pregnancy with the Son of God, had trials.

First she had to explain what happened to Joseph—which put her at risk for stoning.

Who knows what she told her family, but they agreed to her visiting Elizabeth, a 75-100 mile trip at a time when walking was the usual transport for non-wealthy people.

She stayed with Elizabeth and Zacharias for three months and then must have walked home, unless she could ride in a litter. Remember, someone would have traveled with her—she wouldn't be traveling alone.

Mary returned to Nazareth where she learned Joseph had had a supernatural experience—he believed her story and arranged to marry her. This would be earlier than customary and by now the neighbors would realize she was pregnant.

Surely, Mary was relieved, but Joseph's decision meant he joined her in the shame. They both knew the truth, perhaps her parents did as well, but none of the neighbors would have believed the story.

Nine months into the pregnancy, when she would have been preparing to nestled down and give birth to her first child, her devout husband had to take her with him to Bethlehem for the Roman census.

Why then?

I don't know. Perhaps they waited as long as possible, hoping the baby would come before they had to travel?

God knew the right timing and place, but wouldn't they have been checking the Scriptures and learned the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem? See Micah 5:2.

Would she have suspected they'd end up in Egypt? See Hosea 11:1.

Maybe they did know all the above!

Mary had to go with Joseph, so she said goodbye to her family and joined her husband on another 80 mile (111 kilometer) trip to the Judean hill country—where the inhabitants were still buzzing about the miraculous birth to Elizabeth and Zacharias.

My mother told me once that one of the hardest things she ever did was watch me climb into a car six months pregnant with my first child, to drive across the country and give birth—hopefully with my husband present—far from home.

I can't imagine what Mary's family thought when she followed her husband down the narrow track to the road leading south.

At Bethlehem—with kinfolk or without?

Here's a question, though. Would Mary and Joseph have traveled alone, or in an entourage of family? Wouldn't all of their family have needed to return to King David's ancestral village for the census? (Consider Luke 2: 41-42, the family traveled to Jerusalem for Passover together).

The text says nothing about family, but it does not indicate they traveled alone, either. All we know is that by the time they arrived in Bethlehem—a town packed with kinfolk—there was no room for them at an inn. Instead they ended up in a warm shelter, she gave birth and swaddled her child, laying him in a manger for a crib.



St. Mary Church of Gdansk)

That's a lot to have happened in less than a year to any young woman.

My husband likes to point out that the Joseph family may only have been in the "stable" a short period of time. Once the shepherds arrived and ran around town announcing the birth, he's sure every woman in town would be stopping by to see the baby, check out the mother, bring food, gifts, etc. Given they were all related to King David, Joseph may have been offered a job! By the time the wise men arrived, it could have been months, maybe even a year, and the family undoubtedly had a real home. Don't let the crèches fool you!

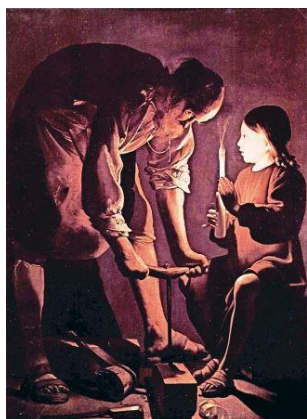
Regardless of what happened, Mary had a significant year: given to her by God, encouraged by family also experiencing miracles, and in combination with a good man and "God with Us."

Filled with shame, potential death, possible worry, plenty of hiking, uncertainty and youth, Mary, the mother of Jesus, approached her God and her confinement with a humble, blessed confidence.

Can we do any less in our lives?



Advent: Who was Joseph?



St. Joseph by George de la Tour

So, who was Joseph, the husband of Mary, the mother of Jesus and how did he find himself in an impossible situation orchestrated by God?

The book of Matthew gives us a genealogy and several interesting points about him.

A descendant, like Mary, of the great King David, Joseph was a carpenter—which could be interpreted as mason or builder. He made things with his hands, which would be typical of the time!

He lived in Nazareth, a fairly insignificant town not far from a trade route, in the hills southwest of the Sea of Galilee. Archaeological research suggests Joseph may have worked in the nearby city of Sepporis which was being rebuilt at the time.

The text does not tell us how old Joseph was, but certainly he would have been much older than his devout bride. He could support himself and a family. He probably had memorized the first five books of the Bible—the Torah—and undoubtedly was a devout Jew.

He entered into a betrothal with Mary—who was a devout young woman.

At that time, Jewish marriage had several stages. The family agreed to the union; the couple announced their betrothal (similar to an engagement, but the relationship could only be broken through death or divorce. No physical relationship allowed). This stage usually lasted a year, some thought to ensure the bride was not pregnant. Finally, they were married and lived together with all rights and privileges.

Matthew 1:19 describes Joseph as being a “just” or “righteous man.”

We do not know when Mary approached him to reveal her pregnancy. Some believe Mary’s trip to Elizabeth was an attempt to avoid an “honor” killing because of the pregnancy. We have no record of who told Joseph—Mary or a member of her family. The Scriptures say only “before they came together, she was found with child by the Holy Spirit.”

What would “she was found with child by the Holy Spirit” mean to Joseph?

“Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not wanting to make her a public example, was minded to put her away secretly.”²⁰ But while he thought about these things . . .”

Because of his character and undoubtedly because he wanted to marry Mary, he thought—prayed?—about what to do with this pregnancy. He probably had chosen the young woman because of her chastity and her devotion to God, but now circumstances suggested he might have misjudged her character. Who was she really?

Imagine how Joseph must have weighed what he thought he knew with evidence that called his understanding into question.

Would Mary have used the term “Holy Spirit?”

Joseph was within his rights to divorce her or call for her stoning. He decided to bestow grace, to not add to her shame, by “putting her away secretly.” Perhaps the pregnancy would not last; perhaps the child would be stillborn. Joseph was trying to shelter Mary from shame.

But he was a devout man, still turning things over in his mind when the supernatural happened to him.

“Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take to you Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit.”²¹ And she will bring forth a Son, and you shall call His name Jesus, for He will save His people from their sins.”

Don’t you think it’s interesting that the angel appeared to Joseph in a *dream*?

Zacharias and Mary met the Angel Gabriel, but this godly man only dreamed about the angel. (Note Elizabeth never saw an angel, but did have the experience of her babe in utero being filled with the Holy Spirit!)

How did Joseph know this was true?

The angel knew his name and his lineage. He spoke to Joseph’s fear. He corroborated what Mary must have said about the Holy Spirit.

Perhaps most significantly, the angel used the name “God will save,” and explained what he would save “His people from their sins.”

The angel just told Joseph Mary carried the Messiah—the one Jews had been waiting for, so full of anticipation that they always set a place for the Messiah at the Passover meal.

The Angel Gabriel did *not* tell Mary the baby she carried would save God’s people from sin.

She probably knew that’s why the Messiah was promised, but the angel-in-a-dream spelled out the baby’s significance to a devout man who needed reassurance of the value of his personal sacrifice.

He finished off the explanation by sending this Jew back to the Isaiah passage he would have known:



Joseph's Dream by Rembrandt

“Behold, the virgin shall be with child, and bear a Son, and they shall call His name Immanuel,” which is translated, “God with us.”

Not only would that baby save the world, his presence was a definitive sign the God Joseph worshiped, would be with him.

Joseph and shame

The decision to embrace Mary and wed her despite this pregnancy would have reflected poorly on Joseph’s character in the small village.

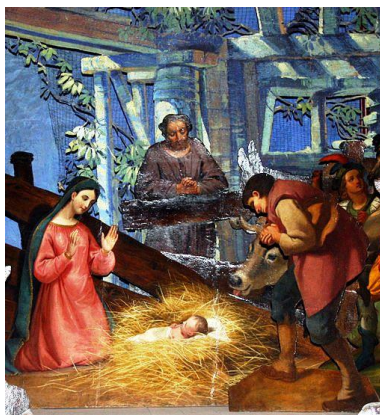
The assumption would have been that Joseph and Mary violated their betrothal when Mary became pregnant. (Remember? That’s why the year between betrothal and marriage).

Joseph sacrificed his personal integrity when he married Mary. But he did so knowing the end: God’s glory.

Truly, he was a man of God and a worthy sinner in need of that step-son.

By all accounts further in Scripture, the people of Nazareth never suspected Jesus was anyone but Joseph’s son. God placed him in that family to shelter him, to nurture him in humanity, so that when he did arrive on the Israeli stage 33 year years later, he came as fully man and fully God.

In part because of the obedience, grace and humility of a carpenter from a small town in the hills.



G. dallorto

The Night Sky, the Shepherds and the Savior



Annunciation to the Shepherds by David Collins

For those who live in cities where the sky is a mere reflection back of the lights, stars and galaxies may not be as common as they are to others.

People like shepherds who spend time away from city lights, often far from civilization, who have plenty of time on their hands.

Or maybe even pilots cruising the night sky above the clouds as they wing their way from point to

point.

Before the electric light, though, the expanse of the heavens closed in as night spread across the sky and prickled darkness with dots of lights: stars and planets clustering into constellations and galaxies.

When the night is dark, they seem closer—almost like a cold blanket tossed overhead.

To me, the heavens are exotic and distant and while I can recognize a few constellations, for the most part they're unknown holes poked into the ceiling of night. I love to see them, but they're anonymous to me.

My son, however, is an astronomer. I asked him how he viewed the sky—were they all friends he recognized instantly?

“Stargazer” laughed:

“When I look at the sky, I seek my bearings immediately. I find a well-known star like Polaris, and that tells me where I am. From there, I can recognize almost anything.”

(Indeed, a member of his former boy scout troop never got over spending an evening in the High listening to Stargazer as he described the wheeling stars and told their stories.)

Familiarity with the night sky is central to several important aspects of the nativity story. Men who spent most nights staring at the stars were completely familiar with what went where and when. They were uniquely situated, once they found Polaris, to see unusual changes in the night sky. Two groups in particular were affected: astronomers in the east often known as magi, and simpler men: shepherds watching their flocks by night.



On the night of Christ's birth, Luke tells us

there were in the same country shepherds living out in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were greatly afraid."

As was his custom, the angel told them not to be afraid and then passed on the extraordinary news that the Messiah they'd been expecting forever had been born *that* day in the city of David.

It's important to remember the hill country around Jerusalem had been filled with news of extraordinary events—the priest Zachariah had been struck dumb while serving in the Jerusalem temple. The elderly man returned home and his elderly wife, known to be barren, had become pregnant and produced a child some months before. While likely not privy to details, this particular group of men were watching over their sheep when an angel appeared.

As soon as the angel finished announcing his extraordinary news, a multitude of the heavenly host praising God joined him.

Were they angels in the sky?

Stars dancing in the heavens?

Incredible movement where movement should not have been?

The text is not clear, but it did note that “when the angels had gone away from them into heaven,” the shepherds headed into Bethlehem to see what the heavenly host were singing about.

“Gone away into heaven,” meaning up into the night sky?

Maybe.

But something extraordinary happened to those citizens that night.

When we're out camping or far from city lights and I look up into the night sky, sometimes I can see the cloudy blur of stars that marks the Milky Way Galaxy. My Stargazer laughs at me—he knows those stars and planets well.

I try to imagine what the night sky looked to those shepherds 2000 years ago.

They must have seen something unusual.

Well, how else would you describe the arrival of their savior and ours into the world?

Advent: Simeon and Anna



Anna in the Temple by Giotto

So who were Simeon and Anna in the Advent story?

Lovers of God who were given the gift of seeing him in the flesh—when Jesus was six weeks old.

After Jesus' birth in the possible-stable in Bethlehem, chances are good he and his parents were shifted to a better spot for a newborn and his mother. If a baby had been born in your garage and placed in a cardboard box you wouldn't have left him there, would you?

Eight days after his birth, he was circumcised as was the custom of his time in the Jewish faith. (Luke 2:21).

According to the Life Application Bible, “circumcision symbolized the Jews' separation from Gentiles and their unique relationship with God.”

The family then settled down for Mary to recover.

Forty days after Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph took their baby boy to the temple in Jerusalem, a seven mile or so walk uphill. By Jewish law, Mary was considered “unclean” during those forty days and would have been secluded—she could not enter the temple. After those forty days, parents were expected to bring their baby to the temple along with a sacrifice for a sin offering.

The sin offering traditionally was a lamb, but in the case of poor families who could not afford a lamb, they could bring “a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons.” The temple priest would sacrifice the animals/birds and declare the mother clean once more. (Leviticus 12:1-8)

Joseph, obviously, was not a wealthy man and brought two birds.

Simeon

Jerusalem's temple was a gathering place for the devout. Daily, priests performed sacrifices. Animals were sold in the outer courtyards, for those sacrifices, other commerce took place. The High Priests were politically connected and for many, temple worship was a ritual or tradition more than a truly worshipful experience.

But God always allows for a remnant of true believers to find him



Simeon in the Temple by Rembrandt

when they seek him and among those individuals were the ancient Anna and Simeon, “a man in Jerusalem . . . just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel.” (Luke 2: 25)

It does not say he was a member of the priesthood, but he knew God had promised a Messiah who would comfort his people (Isaiah 12:1).

In addition, Simeon had had an encounter with the Holy Spirit—not an angel:

the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ. So he came by the Spirit into the temple.”

Fascinating. God sent the Holy Spirit when Jesus left the earth—to live in his people. How is it Simeon had been filled with that Holy Spirit?

To give glory and recognize the Son of God—just as John the Baptist did when he leapt in his mother’s womb.

God gave this righteous man a promise: he would not die before the Messiah returned.

That probably would be enough to keep me in the temple worshiping and waiting!

And then one day, while Simeon was going about his business of worshiping God a young family entered and the Holy Spirit ignited Simeon—who took the child into his arms:

“Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word: For my eyes have seen Your salvation which You have prepared before the face of all peoples, a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel.”

Such a blessing, and yet another reminder to Mary and Joseph that God was with them and the child was from Him. Did they need any more reassurance God had sent this child and his purpose in so doing?

Simeon continued, though, and gave the pondering mother a little more to think about:

“Behold, this child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign which will be spoken (yes, a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed.”

What did that even mean?

Mothers tend to focus on the horror of a child being pierced by a sword, and Mary lived to see that happen to Jesus but the second clause may be more pertinent: God looks at our hearts and so judges. Jesus provides the means by which God can look at us, despite our sin.

What had started out as an obedient trip to the temple had turned into something extraordinary.

And there was one more prophecy to come.

Anna

Luke records Anna was a prophetess, the daughter of Panuel (face of God) of the tribe of Asher (whose land was located in the hill country west of Galilee).

Probably married at a young age, it appears her husband died seven years after the wedding and she spent the next 84 years in the temple fasting and worshipping God with prayers night and day.

She was “of a great age,” probably in the neighborhood of 105 years!

“Prophetess” suggests she was unusually close to God—and thus able and willing to proclaim God’s truth. When she came across Jesus, “she gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of Him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem.”

She saw Jesus after Simeon and focused on what his purpose was in coming—to redeem his people from sin.

Note she spoke about him to those who were looking for their Messiah—not necessarily the religious authorities.

It had been a fascinating time of unprecedented change and unusual occurrences in the temple—surely some understood the significance of what had happened.

Within the previous 18 months Zacharias had lost his voice and seen an angel while making the sacrifice. God had intervened in a miraculous way and Zechariah’s elderly and barren wife Elizabeth had given birth to a child. Shepherds reported that angels had appeared to them and told of the newborn king. The countryside was rife with stories and discussion—what could God be up to?

Simeon and Anna recognized the truth and pointed to the Savior of the World.

Those who had eyes to see, must have wondered, prayed, given thanks and waited—what would happen next with this extraordinary child?



Anna the Prophetess by Rembrandt

Advent: Enter the Magi



Journey of the Magi by James Tissot

Many of us grew up nativity stories that included camels bearing magi to green the newborn king in the manger.

That's true—That's true—sort of. Let's look at the passage and rethink the story from a different angle.

Magi--wise men, seers, learned astronomers.

Matthew 2:1-18 tells us they came from the east to Jerusalem.

East of Jerusalem at that time (much like today), the land stretched barren and relatively unpopulated. The “east” probably would have included the area of the fertile crescent, and that center of learning Babylon.

While we do not know, exactly, who these magi/kings/seers were, we can surmise they were wealthy—or at least had wealthy patrons—to have made such a journey carrying their infamous gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.

They saw a “star” in the sky, determined it marked something important, gathered together what they needed and headed west—on a journey that probably took some time.

The text explains their motivation through their surprised question when they arrived in a somnolent Jerusalem not celebrating:

“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him.”

This is what they knew: they were seeking a male, he was born, he was the King of the Jews, they wanted to worship him and they had seen his star.

Whatever that star was, and there are plenty of suggestions, it was something extraordinary that prompted such an enormous response when travel was complicated, dangerous and took a long time.

The magi may or may not have had access to the Hebrew Scriptures, but the fact they understood whom they were seeking and why, suggests they believed a significant event had occurred.

Why are magi included in the nativity story?

They add an historic element to the story—setting the time during Herod’s reign. Even those who were not Jewish understood the significance; it demonstrates the emptiness of temple worship at the time, and helps us recognize Herod and his officials were not reliable witnesses.



*The Adoration of the Magi
by Bonifazio de Pitagari*

Indeed, Herod’s corrupt kingdom administration had influenced the temple authorities in their refusal to act in accordance with the Hebrew texts.

The magi’s visit also lets us see Jesus did not remain forever in a stable. His family moved on to a dwelling and as we see next time, Joseph was still getting dreams from God.

What’s interesting about the Matthew passage is that while the narrator is omniscient, the opening scene at Herod’s court is basically told from the point of view of folks in Jerusalem, not the magi themselves.

The magi made no pretense about why they had come. They would have traveled in an entourage of servants and guards—probably on camels, which you can read about here.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they expected the town to be buzzing about that new king. Instead, nothing.

But their question inspired others in that Judean hill country that must have remembered all the fantastic things that happened—Zacharias in the temple, the shepherds, Anna and Simeon.

The questions eventually reached Herod’s court and he, though only half-Jewish, understood something momentous had happened.

Maybe a minor temple priest’s story, shepherds and the others, were insignificant to a man under Rome’s authority, but obviously wealthy magi from afar seemed to know something he didn’t—and expected him to have answers.

Before calling the magi in to confer in private, he called together all his priests and scribes—the people who should have informed him of this coming, and asked them.

They knew the answer, anyone trained in the Hebrew Scriptures could have pointed him to the answer.

“In Bethlehem of Judea, for thus it is written by the prophet: ‘But you, Bethlehem, in the land, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who will shepherd My people Israel.’”

If you were the king, wouldn't you be angry you didn't know the "usurper" to your throne had been born not a few miles away?

He called in the magi. Herod needed to know when this king had been born.

Perhaps the star the magi had followed had not been apparent in the Judean hill country; that may be the reason the local authorities missed its appearance. (Did no one report about the angels appearing to shepherds? Were shepherds considered unreliable authorities?)

The magi, having no reason to suppose a half-Jewish ruler would not share in their excitement, gave him the date.

Herod thanked them and sent them on their way, covering his only duplicity with the suggestion they return to him and tell him where the babe was, so he could worship him, too.

"And he sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me that I may come and worship Him also."

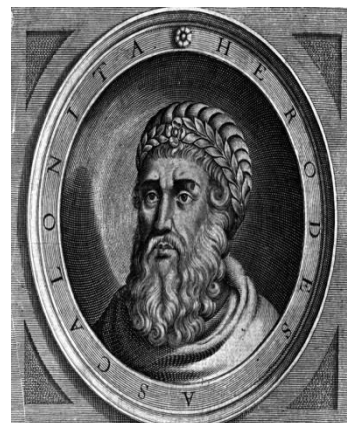
Do you really think he didn't send spies to follow the magi? After the magi left Herod, *"behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy."*

I wonder if the star had disappeared from sight, and it only reappeared after their meeting with Herod. Regardless, they followed it again to the house where Jesus was living with Mary and Joseph. They entered and worshiped that new born king, giving him their gifts—valuable items if sold.

Like Joseph, they were responsive to the leading of the Holy Spirit and when they were warned in a dream, they returned to their home country a different way, without reporting in to Herod.

Interestingly, it was that same night that Joseph got his next dream.

The feast of the Three Wise Kings is celebrated on Epiphany—January 6.



Herod the King

Advent: Jesus' Childhood



*The Flight into Egypt by
Giotto di Bondone*

The Bible gives us just a few peeks into Jesus' boyhood, though his life has been embroidered by many in the 2000 years since his birth.

We basically have information about his dedication a reference to the family returning to Nazareth, the wise men visiting him and his family in Bethlehem the family's flight to Egypt and return to finally settle in Nazareth for good.

So, was Jesus' childhood spent in Nazareth or Bethlehem?

It's tricky.

Luke 2:39-20 explains events after that temple dedication this way:

"So when they had performed all things according to the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own city, Nazareth. ⁴⁰ And the Child grew and became strong in spirit, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him."

This says the family returned to Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary originally lived, after they submitted to the Roman census in their ancestral hometown of Bethlehem.

The book of Luke was written by a learned Greek doctor who traveled with the apostle Paul after Jesus' death. Traditionally, Luke is believed to have gotten the story of Jesus' birth from his mother, Mary, who was still alive when Jesus was crucified.

Luke was writing an orderly account, aimed at Gentiles, and so his story focused on the basic facts.

Jesus grew up in Nazareth after being born in Bethlehem.

Except for the interlude in Egypt.

The gospel of Matthew interjects another story into Jesus' childhood: the visit of the magi and a subsequent hurried trip to Egypt.

The text says the wise men visited the baby and his parents in a house in Bethlehem, where the magi presented their expensive gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. They then departed after worshiping the new born king.

That night, according to Matthew 2: 13-15, Joseph had another dream:

"Now when they had departed, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, flee to Egypt, and stay there until I bring you word; for Herod will seek the young Child to destroy Him." ¹⁴ When he arose, he took the young Child and His mother by night and departed for Egypt, ¹⁵ and was there until the death

of Herod that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the Lord through the prophet, saying, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

What do you make of this?

Did Joseph and Mary take their child to Nazareth after his dedication, or did they hang around Bethlehem longer to meet the wise men?

The most plausible explanation is after the dedication, Joseph and Mary returned to their Nazareth home. Once there, after showing the baby to the relatives and neighbors, they gathered their possessions and moved to their ancestral village of Bethlehem. Perhaps Joseph saw better opportunities to support his family there. Perhaps Mary wanted to be closer to Elizabeth. Perhaps the couple both thought the son of God should be raised in closer proximity to the Jewish temple in Jerusalem.

We don't know how long they might have lived in Bethlehem, though it probably was under two years. That can be conjectured by what happened when the wise men did not return to tell Herod what they had found (we're still in Matthew):

"⁶ Then Herod, when he saw that he was deceived by the wise men, was exceedingly angry; and he sent forth and put to death all the male children who were in Bethlehem and in all its districts, from two years old and under, according to the time which he had determined from the wise men."

Herod's ordered Slaughter of the Innocents was intended to kill the baby Jesus.

He had not anticipated God would intervene, apparently the very night the wise men left Bethlehem.

Many believe that flight to Egypt was paid for by the gifts brought by the magi. And why not? We worship an orderly and efficient God.

It's not clear how long the family lived in Egypt, but I've always liked the song "My Deliverer," by Rich Mullins depicting what Jesus' time there might have been like, and the poignant image of the child Jesus listening to people plead for their redemption?

When Herod died, circa AD 6, Joseph decided it was safe to return to Israel with his family:

¹⁹ Now when Herod was dead, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph, ²⁰ saying, "Arise, take the young Child and His mother, and go to the land of Israel, for those who sought the young Child's life are dead." ²¹ Then he arose, took the young Child and His mother, and came into the land of Israel.

²² *But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning over Judea instead of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. And being warned by God in a dream, he turned aside into the region of Galilee.* ²³ *And he came and dwelt in a city called Nazareth that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophets, “He shall be called a Nazarene.”*

Bethlehem, the “house of bread,” might have been a lovely place to live with promise, but Joseph and Mary had learned that following God would bring blessings. They obeyed Joseph’s dream and returned to live in Nazareth. They journeyed to Jerusalem, still down that road, every year at Passover—as befits a devout Jewish family.

Why the confusion between the two Gospel accounts?

Richard Bruce explains:

“The key point is that Luke is writing to a Roman official and Matthew is writing to Christians who were formerly Jews. In other words, Luke is writing to the oppressor and Matthew is writing to the oppressed. Luke has carefully left out those things that would upset the Roman official, Theophilus, or any other Roman official that Theophilus might show Luke’s gospel. Matthew has similarly left out those things that would upset Jewish Christians.”

The Scriptures are limited to what God wanted people to know about Jesus. The only other glimpse we have of his childhood is the story in the temple, when at the age of 12 Jesus already was concerned with “being about my father’s business.” He was well taught in the Torah and confounded the learned religious leaders in Jerusalem.

What else would you expect from the son of God?



Anno Domini by Edwin Long

A Strange Christmas Carol for Him



Christmas carols always have been important to me—ever since that Christmas I was six and begged my parents for a piano.

They gave me one!

Christmas carols ring through my soul and cheer up each Advent season. Don't you love the faint whispers of angels singing while shopping in crowded stores?

The concept of the Christ child as Savior of the world, while known in theory, became true in practice for me during my fifteenth Christmas. I'd begun reading the Bible that fall and suddenly I saw connections all around in December.

I also heard Handel's *Messiah* for the first time that year.

(And saw *It's a Wonderful Life*, for the first time. Amazing what can happen when you start attending high school!)

I'd never sung in four-part harmony until I attended Trinity Lutheran Church. *Gloria* rang through my heart and soul for the first time and I delighted to soar up to those high notes.

We've all got favorite Christmas carols, but one that has meant much to me for many years comes from 4Him's 1993 *Seasons of Love* Christmas album. Composed by Mark Harris, Donald Koch and David Allen Clark, the lyrics catch my wonder and imagination every time I hear their version: "Strange Way To Save The World," as they capture Joseph's confusion about why God would choose someone so ordinary to help God save the world.

*Now I'm not one to second guess what angels have to say
But this is such a strange way to save the world*

Everyone knows Mary is the heroine of the Christmas story, after God himself, but this song reminds me of Joseph's faith—and really, mine, too, that God would

Christmas carols, the music, lights and presents, are all a small reflection of the truly amazing event which happened when God poured himself into the innocent feeble body of an infant and presented him to a young woman and a perhaps nervous man to raise together.

Jesus is the reason for the season—and God chose ordinary people, in an ordinary time and place, to leave his mark for all humanity.

A blessed Advent season to all!