

# 2

## GOD IS WITH US Birth Narratives

*To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

Birth stories matter. I've heard parents tell their child, "We knew you would be a thinker when you put your hand under your chin during the ultrasound!" We invest great importance in what happens first. That's why ancient authors characterized their heroes by narrating special birth stories.

The Bible's story of Jesus' birth arrives in two packages: Luke tells it through Mary, who hears an angel and says a profound "Yes!" to the purposes of God: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). Matthew tells it through Joseph, who also heeds the word of an angel and does what is right. From such faithful parents comes the baby Jesus, who will be no less than "Emmanuel, . . . God is with us" (Matthew 1:23). Soon, wise men from the East will come along with gifts.

O come let *us* adore him!



### **A RIGHTEOUS DADDY** (Matthew 1:18-25)

Dreamers named Joseph finally fare very well in the Bible, but they don't travel an easy road. The one with a technicolor jacket eventually rose in Pharaoh's court by interpreting dreams for him (Genesis 37–50), but only after enduring slavery and prison time. The carpenter of Matthew's story wore much more drab attire, we would imagine, but he got his dream too—and just at the right excruciating time.

Joseph has just heard Mary say words that send a chill through any chaste fiancé: "I'm pregnant." How could this be? And what should he do? The law of Moses licenses Joseph to have Mary stoned in the town square for her betrayal. But he is a "righteous man" and "unwilling to expose her to public

disgrace” (1:19), so he plans to end the engagement quietly. Oh, the agony of infidelity!

Imagine the night before Joseph would tell Mary of his decision. Each of us has known this sort of tortured, sleepless night. When Joseph finally dozes off, he dreams of an angel visitor. “Joseph, . . . do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit” (1:20). Do not be afraid, says the angel, and fear must be in his tortured mix of emotions—fear of a far different future than he expected. And the angel won’t give back his normal future: “She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” This sort of reassurance may not lead to sound sleep, but it is far better than what he thought before.

Joseph marries Mary (“he took her as his wife”) and gets on the roller coaster. He’ll have another angel dream that sends the family to safe haven in Egypt (2:13). Then when the grown-up Jesus preaches in his hometown, Nazarene neighbors will deride Jesus, “He’s just Joseph’s boy, right?”

To you and me, Joseph will ever and always be a shining example of a kind of faith that does not get off when the ride gets bumpy.

*Joseph: “You want me to do what?”*

- Has God ever led your life in an unexpected direction? How did you recognize that the prompt came from God?



## A HEAVEN-FAVORED MAMA

(Luke 1:26-38, 46-55)

Luke plays Mary’s side of the split-screen video. A poor, newly engaged, teenage girl lives her own non-descript life in Nazareth, counting down the days ‘til her very normal wedding and married life.

Then an angel interrupts. “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you” (Luke 1:28). Throughout

Scripture, angels evoke fear, but Mary is at least as puzzled as she is scared. What?! How could God choose me?

And if the greeting confused her, what came next was baffling: “You’re going to have a baby boy, and he is going to reign over God’s people as the great King David did. By the way: call him Jesus, will you?” To her great credit, the virgin girl blurts out the obvious question: “How?!” The angel answers to Mary’s satisfaction.

Mary: “Let it be . . .”

- To what sort of “Mary moment” may God be calling you?
- We all wonder what kind of people God uses. What do you learn about faithful living from Joseph and Mary?

Mary’s ultimate answer to the angel puts her in honored company. She sounds like Israel’s greatest leaders—like Moses answering God at the burning bush (Exodus 3:4) and Isaiah in the temple (Isaiah 6:8). How could she have known that during all those Scripture stories with her family, God was training her for her own big story? But this girl’s words echo theirs: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord” (Luke 1:38).

As for her next words, the God-blessed son will repeat them in a far-off garden with sweat rolling and tears streaming. Maybe Mary told stories of her chat with the angel. Or maybe the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Whatever the cause, her “Let it be with me according to your word” sounds a lot like his “Thy will be done!” Like mother, like Son.

It’s no wonder Mary is surprised. God has done an unexpected thing. But strange as it is, she says yes, and she ponders the wonder-full mystery of God. As her soul “magnifies the Lord,” she echoes the words of Hannah, another saint of Israel (1 Samuel 2:1-10).

I wonder: for what bigger-than-we-imagined story is God training you and me?



## THE CENTER MOVES (Luke 2:1-20)

Joseph and Mary live out at the edge of the Roman world. But the most famous part of the greatest story ever told begins at its center. The Roman Emperor Augustus rides aloft in litters carried by slaves. Well-to-do clients endure long lines in hopes of a few seconds in his presence. The most powerful people in the world know not to cross him. All the world bows down to their “Savior” and “Lord,” the Emperor Augustus. When Caesar says, “Jump!” they all ask, “How high?”

One day the man at the center of the world wants to know how many minions he has in Syria. So Caesar’s people at the center call Governor Quirinius’s people at the outer edge, and suddenly a nowhere and nobody couple named Mary and Joseph get their turn to ask “How high?” She is “with child” and should not travel, but Joseph and Mary are the people, and Caesar-at-the-center is the emperor, so they set out. Their route tracks through the hill country of Galilee, then east across the Jordan and back west again at the Dead Sea. It’s not easy travel. But they make their long,

winding way to Bethlehem, hometown of Joseph's great, great, great grand-daddy David, who once was king.

That's when something strange happens: way off at the edge of the world, heavenly angels terrify peasant shepherds, but then comfort them with startling words: "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (Luke 2:10-11).

Life having been slow out at the edge of the world, the shepherds immediately drop everything and sprint to town, where they find the poor family in the stable that was all they could find.

They arrive to find Joseph and Mary and a baby "wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." The Savior is in Bethlehem. And as peasant shepherds adore a peasant carpenter's son in a rude stable with no one else watching, there is cause to believe that the center of the universe has moved.



### WISE MEN (Matthew 2:1-12)

Another sign that the center has moved comes next in Matthew's story, when "wise men from the East" make their way—not to the great city of Rome, but to the little town of Bethlehem. Angels have been our guides so far. One told Joseph (in a dream) that his son would save his people from their sins.

Another told Mary that their son would rule the people Israel. Yet another sent shepherds to the manger.

Now the heavens speak differently as a peculiar star sends eastern astronomers on a journey. From distant lands, wise men venture to visit the baby. When they inquire in Jerusalem, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (2:2) any Jew would have been reminded of "the Messiah."

And yet Jerusalem is hardly ready for the question. For nearly six centuries, since the exile to Babylon, Israel has wondered when God would renew David's dynasty. So when King Herod asks chief priests and scribes where the Messiah would be born, they come up with the answer easily. But these

### *The Savior is born in Bethlehem*

- How would you say that Jesus' birth has re-centered the universe? How has Jesus' birth "rocked your world"?
- The Greek word translated *angel* also means "messenger." Who or what are God's angels in your life?

*Wise Men: "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?"*

- What do you think it means that those outside Jesus' own people recognize he was born to be king?

leaders are conspicuously uninterested. They do not hitch their camels and get in line behind the magi. Nor do the people. The only real interest comes from Herod himself, who fakes a desire to pay the boy-king homage, but really (and tragically) hopes to extinguish the potential competition.

Herod has misjudged the nature of the new king's reign. But a hint arrives in the gifts these wise foreigners bring. Gold befits a king, of course. But frankincense and myrrh, while expensive, are spices that speak of death. T. S. Eliot poses this mystery in his poem "The Gift of the Magi." There the wise ones, after their arduous journey, ask themselves "were we led all that way for / Birth or Death?"

Only time will tell.

## Background Files

**Messiah.** Israel's expectation of a Messiah ("anointed one") joins God's promise to David of an everlasting dynasty (2 Samuel 7:1-15), with the fact that Babylonian soldiers ended that dynasty in 587 B.C.E. (2 Kings 24–25).

**Birth Story Distinctions.** While most nativity pageants bring shepherds and wise men into the story, Matthew and Luke each tell the story of Jesus' birth differently and with their own themes in mind.

Matthew sees Jesus' birth and life as a fulfillment of Jewish expectations. Five times he quotes Hebrew Scripture to show that these events fulfill what the prophets expected (1:23; 2:5, 15, 17-18, 23).

Luke's Jesus performs on the world stage, so here in Luke 2 and when he introduces John the Baptist in Luke 3 he names a long list of leaders over the Roman and Jewish people.

**Geography.** Examine the maps "The Roman Empire" and "Palestine in Jesus' Time," pages 2108–2109 in *Lutheran Study Bible*. Find Nazareth in Galilee, Bethlehem in Judea, and the city of Rome in Italy. Notice the large territory the Roman Empire controlled.



## PICTURING THE STORY

As you watch the story unfold in the video, consider:

- What do you find most remarkable or intriguing in the stories surrounding the birth of Jesus?
  - With which character do you most easily identify in these stories?
  - What questions are raised for you?
  - If you could ask any character in the birth stories a question, who would it be? What would you ask?
- What did the artist help you see in a new way?



## SINGING THE STORY

*Just as the Psalms were the songbook of the people of Israel, so Christians have written and sung hymns and songs to convey the story of Jesus and its meaning.*

“O Little Town of Bethlehem” (Phillips Brooks, 1835–1893)

O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie!

Above thy deep and dreamless sleep the silent stars go by;  
yet in thy dark streets shineth the everlasting Light.

The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

How silently, how silently, the wondrous Gift is giv'n!

So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heav'n.

No ear may hear his coming; but in this world of sin,

where meek souls will receive him, still the dear Christ enters in.

How is it that such a “silent” birth in a faraway place has had such a loud impact on the world? How do your hopes and fears meet in Jesus?

## MARK IT

Choose one or more of the following passages to read during the coming week. Mark your readings using the marking method shown below.

Luke 1:46-56  
Matthew 2:13-18

Luke 1:67-80  
Ephesians 1:3-14

## Marking Your Bible

Make notes about the questions and insights you have as you read your Bible. The following symbols might be helpful.

- \* A chapter or verse important to me
- ! A new idea
- ✓ A passage to memorize
- ? Something not clear to me
- ∞ God's love
- Ⓢ A promise from God
- ≈ Something that connects with my experience
- † My relationship with God
- ↔ My relationships with others

## Next Time

Use the following suggestions to prepare for Session 3 and review Session 2.

Review the study notes in *Lutheran Study Bible* for:

- Matthew 1:1—4:11
- Mark 1:1-13
- Luke 1:1—4:13
- John 1:1-34

Read the following passages from the Gospels:

- Matthew 3:1—4:11
- Mark 1:4-13
- Luke 3:1—4:13
- John 1:19-34

## Gospels Reading Plan

If you wish to read one entire Gospel or all four Gospels during the sixteen weeks of this study, follow this weekly reading plan.

**Week 2:** Matthew 3:1—4:11; Mark 1:9-45; Luke 3:1—4:13; John 2:1—3:36