

*Luke 2:1-20*

*In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 4 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, 5 to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. 6 And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. 7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*8 And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying,*

*14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"*

*15 When 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." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. 20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

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When you were a child, did you have a favorite story? One that you wanted your parents to read to you over and over again? Or a favorite tv show, or movie?

The story of the birth of Jesus is that kind of story, for all of us. It is a story that we want to read, and to hear, again and again.

And so, we have gathered today to do just that. To hear this story, this miraculous, amazing, life-giving, world-changing story. This story that is too good to be true, except that it is. To hear this story, and to listen to the music that it has inspired.

We aren't quite hearing it the way we want to this year. We can't sing our favorite carols together; we can't receive the bread and wine of our Lord; we can't spend time in fellowship in all the ways that we would like. But the story is still told. The birth of our Lord is still celebrated. Christmas still comes to us, in all of its wonder and glory. And there is no virus that can keep that away.

And so, here we are, to hear this story again, and to listen to these beloved carols. And each piece of the story we just heard – like pieces of a puzzle – teaches us something important and wonderful about the One in whose name we gather; the One whose birth for us and for our world we celebrate on this holy night.

### **Old Testament Prophecy**

We start this story in the Old Testament, with the prophet Micah, where we learn that the Savior is to come from Bethlehem, the City of David, where the Messiah had long been expected. It is an important town only to God. It is not Jerusalem. It is not Rome. It is not a religious center, or a political center. It is a small town that is important to God because it is the town of King David. The little town of Bethlehem, a town whose name literally means “The House of Bread.” Which is wonderful, isn’t it? Even at his birth, we are reminded that Jesus is to be our bread of life. The one who would one day offer his own body and blood as our bread of life and cup of salvation.

#### *Mic 5:2-5*

*But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days.<sup>3</sup> Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has given birth; then the rest of his brothers shall return to the people of Israel.<sup>4</sup> And he shall stand and shepherd his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall dwell secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth. <sup>5</sup> And he shall be their peace.*

*ESV*

### **The Annunciation**

The story then picks up in the New Testament, with Luke’s gospel, which takes us to another small town, Nazareth, and to the home of a young woman engaged to Joseph. The angel Gabriel visits this town, and shares the stunning news that this young woman, Mary, would conceive and bear a son, who would be the Son of the Most High. A miraculous conception, but perhaps even more miraculous that Mary believed the angel, and agreed to do as asked. A decision that would change her life forever, and that would one day lead to great heartache and grief, as she watched her son die on a cross. But a decision that she made not just for herself, but for all the world.

#### *Luke 1:26-36*

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one,*

*the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And 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 bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to 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." 34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" 35 And 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.*

### **The Shepherds, the Angels, and the Magi**

And then, the story begins to ripple out, first to the shepherds, those humble shepherds who were the first to receive the news of our dear Savior's birth. Not kings, or priests, or anyone very important to anyone. But to simple, humble shepherds. They are told the good news by the angels, of course, as the story continues to connect heaven and earth. Angels who give glory to God and peace to earth as they, too, celebrate his miracle.

### *Luke 2:8-20*

*And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with fear. 10 And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. 11 For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. 12 And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" 15 When 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." 16 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. 17 And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. 18 And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. 19*

*But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.  
20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

But the story can't stop there. It ripples further, to the magi from the East; gentiles, like you and me, reminding us that this child would be the Savior of all, not just a chosen few. News which upsets King Herod, and results in the death of children, reminding us again that the world will not always open its arms to receive her newborn king.

We learn from the magi that the story even changes the stars in the sky, with a new star leading the magi to Bethlehem, where they kneel before the child and pay him homage.

### *Matt 2:1-12*

*Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet: 6 "'And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel.'" 7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me word, that I too may come and worship him." 9 After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. 11 And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. 12 And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.*

Just as we do tonight. This story, connecting heaven and earth, changing the stars, and causing the angels to sing, always brings us back to Bethlehem, back to this simple, beautiful, heavenly birth. Born that we no more may die. Born to be our Savior, the one who is the Messiah, the Lord. We pay him homage tonight,

with all those of all generations, who have faced countless challenges and hardships, and who have found hope lying in the manger.

### **The Story Continues Through Us**

But the story doesn't end, even there. We can't just pay him homage tonight, and go home. This story is intended to continue, through us. Christmas, the birth of our Savior, is meant to get us involved in God's plan for the world. Jesus wasn't just born for us so that he could die for us, so that he could save us. He also wanted to teach us. He wanted to show us what we could do to participate in his mission to save this world.

We light our candles tonight, and we give thanks for Jesus, who is the light of our world. But, as we do this, it's good to remember that Jesus also taught us how to be the light of the world. He challenges us, in fact, to let our light so shine before others that they may see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. He asks us to let his light shine through us into the darkness of our world; into the illness, the sadness, the violence, the skepticism, the doubt, the despair, into all that is facing our neighbors, our nation, and our world.

And we do this by doing what Jesus did. We do this loving others as Jesus loves us. We do this by feeding the hungry, by caring for the sick, by comforting the dying, by listening to the lonely. We do this by working for justice, and by loving all, regardless of what they have done, or even what they believe. Just like Jesus did.

And when we do this, the story of Christmas continues to be told, and continues to unfold. Just as Jesus intended.

### **Closing**

The story began in such a simple way, with a humble birth, in a small town in Palestine, with hardly anyone present. But the miracle of that birth, and the gift of that child, continues to ripple through our world, sending wave after wave of hope and light and life and joy.

And this hope and light continue to come to our weary world whenever we participate in this miraculous story.

So, let us continue to find joy in this story, but also to share this story; to share our hope and our light with this weary world. Let us continue to do this until all this weary world rejoices.

And let us continue to hear the angels sing, even when we cannot, of the good news of great joy for all the people. For to us is born this day in the city of David



a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace, now and forevermore. Amen