

This and That - The Real Christmas Story

Written by Helen Kaverman

Monday, December 24, 2012 9:50 AM - Last Updated Thursday, February 28, 2013 11:23 AM

During the reign of King Herod there lived in the mountains of Judea an aged priest, named Zachary and his wife, Elizabeth. They were a happy couple but they had no children, although they would like to have a family. One day while Zachary, according to the custom of the priests, was burning incense within the sanctuary, suddenly an angel appeared to him. The angel told him that their prayers had been heard, and his wife, Elizabeth, in her old age, would bear a son, and he should call his name John. This boy name John would later be known as John the Baptist

Six months after this event, the Angel Gabriel was sent from God to a town of Galilee, called Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David, and the virgin's name was Mary. And coming to her, the angel said, "Hail, full of grace! The Lord is with thee; blessed art thou amongst women!" When Mary heard these startling words, she became exceedingly troubled, not knowing what they could mean. Then the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of David his father, and he will rule over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." But Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have no relations with a man?" And the angel said to her in reply, "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. And behold, Elizabeth, your relative, has also conceived a son in her old age, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren; for nothing will be impossible for God." Mary said, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. May it be done to me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

After the angel left her, Mary hastened to visit her cousin, Elizabeth in the hill country and the town of Judah. When she entered the house, Elizabeth was suddenly filled with the Holy Spirit, and in an ecstasy of joy, cried out: "Blessed art thou amongst women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb! And how does this happen to me that the mother of my Lord, should come to me! For

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at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears the infant in my womb leaped for joy." Mary remained with her cousin, Elizabeth about three months and then returned to her home.

When Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they lived together, and Joseph learned that Mary was with child, he was very troubled. Joseph, her husband, since he was a righteous man, yet unwilling to expose her to shame, decided to divorce her quietly. Such was his intention, when behold, the angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife into your home. For it is through the Holy Spirit that this child has been conceived in her. She will bear a son and you are to name him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall be with child and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, "which means "God is with us" When Joseph awoke, he did as the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took his wife into his home. He had no relations with her until she bore a son, and he named him Jesus.

According to Jewish customs there were three official steps a couple went through to become man and wife. The first step was the engagement. This was often made when the couple were only children, usually through the dictates of the parents. The second step was the betrothal, a ratification of an engagement. After the parents had agreed on a marriage contract, Joseph was probably brought before Mary. A formal benediction was offered over them by their parents as they tasted a cup of wine together. Although this was a legal binding in the Galilean countryside, virginity was maintained until the wedding itself. This usually took place a year later.

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David, called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

Caesar Augustus, the ruler of the Roman empire, had decreed a census be taken of his entire empire. He also ordered all subjects of Rome to return to their ancestral home towns for the registration. This meant an 80 to 90 mile journey for Mary and Joseph from their hometown of Nazareth to the birth place of their ancestors, Bethlehem. During the Roman empire a periodical census was taken with the double object of assessing taxation and of discovering who was liable for compulsory military services. Since the Jews were exempt from military service, the Palestine census was primarily for taxation purposes.

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After traveling almost a week, Mary and Joseph would have arrived in Bethlehem.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, they could find no place in the inns, so they took lodging in a stable. While they were there; the time came for Mary to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, since there was no room for them in the inn.

Now there were shepherds in that region living in the fields and keeping the night watch over their flock. The angel of the Lord appeared to them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were struck with great fear. The angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I proclaim to you good news of great joy that will be for all people. For today in the city of David a savior has been born for you who is Messiah and Lord. And this will be a sign for you, you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was a multitude of the heavenly host with the angel, praising God and saying. "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men of good will!" The shepherds hastened to Bethlehem to see what had taken place, which the Lord has made known to them. When they saw the infant they made known the message that had been told to them about this child. All who heard it were amazed by what had been told them by the shepherds. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them.

When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

Forty days after the birth of her son, Mary and Joseph went to the temple for their purification according to the law of Moses. They took him to Jerusalem, which was a six mile journey from Bethlehem. This would be the end of Mary's official confinement, according to law. Since they were poor and couldn't afford the offering of a lamb, Joseph bought two turtle doves for the sacrifice. After slaughtering the doves the priest would climb to the altar, and place the doves on the sacrificial fire. Voices of chanting Levites filled the air with psalms in praise to the Lord as the smoke rose upward.

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon. This man was righteous and devout, awaiting the consolation of Israel and the Holy Spirit was upon him. It had been

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revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he should not see death before he had seen the Messiah of the Lord. He came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus to perform the custom of the law in regard to him, he took him into his arms and blessed God, saying, "Now, Master, you may let your servant go in peace, according to your word, for my eyes have seen your salvation."

Some time after the birth of Christ, three magi from the east arrived in Jerusalem saying, "Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We saw his star at its rising and have come to do him homage." When King Herod heard this, he was greatly troubled, and all Jerusalem with him. Assembling all the chief priests and the scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They said to him, "In Bethlehem of Judea for thus it has been written through the prophet: 'And you, Bethlehem, land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; since from you shall come a ruler, who is to shepherd my people Israel.'

Then Herod called the magi secretly and ascertained from the time of the star's appearance. He sent them Bethlehem and said, "Go and search for the child. When you have found him, bring me word, that I too may go and do him homage." The magi set out and behold the star that they had seen at its rising preceded them, until it came and stopped over the place where the child was.

Upon entering the house they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage. Then they opened their treasures and offered him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed for their country by another way.

Much symbolism has been placed on their gifts to the Christ-child. The first, gold, a royal gift signified Jesus' kingship. His future priesthood is symbolized by the gift of frankincense. This was a fragrant gum burned as incense. The third, myrrh, was an aromatic orange-colored resin from small thorny trees. This was expensive and was used in perfumes, anointing oil, medicine and embalming.

During the night God warned the magi not to return to Herod, for he meditated harm to the child so they returned home a different way.

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Herod, seeing the magi did not return to him, became jealous and angry, and resolving to destroy the new born King, ordered all the children in Bethlehem and the country round about to be put to death. He foolishly thought Jesus would surely be killed among the rest, little dreaming how easily God could shield Him. While Herod was preparing for the murder of the holy innocents, an angel appeared to Joseph in his sleep and told him to take the child and its mother and flee into Egypt and remain there until told to return. Without a word of complaint, Joseph rose and taking the child and his mother, went into Egypt.

Herod sent his messengers to Bethlehem to murder the children. As a punishment for his cruelty, Herod died some years later, amid the most horrid torments.

Again the angel appeared to Joseph and commanded him to return to Judea, because Herod was dead. So Jesus, Mary and Joseph returned and dwelt in Nazareth. Thus it came to pass that Christ was called a Nazarene.

Since St. Matthew first described the star of Bethlehem, its mystery has fascinated mankind. Was it a miracle or was it a brighter-than-usual celestial object. Astronomers, while seeking the identify of the star, emphasize that it might be a miracle or some natural phenomena.

The Danish astronomer, Tycho Brahe, discovered a new and brilliant star in the constellation Cassiopela in 1572. Since that discovery it has been suggested that this might be an especially brilliant star visible only at long intervals.

A reported appearance of a bright star in that part of the heavens about the middle of the 13th century, coupled with a vague account of a similar appearance a little more than 300 years earlier, led to the thought that these might possibly be former appearances of the star of 1572.

If, as this might indicate, the star appeared at intervals of 310 to 315 years, these intervals of 300 years from the time it was first reported would carry it back to about the time of the birth of Jesus. Johannes Kepler, a German astronomer, made discoveries that led to still another theory about the star of Bethlehem. In 1604, having observed a configuration of close grouping of the planets Jupiter, Saturn and Mars. He determined that such a configuration occurred each 805 years and calculations established that the same grouping might have appeared in 6 B.C. – which some research indicates may have been the correct year of Christ's birth. Since legends

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identify the wise men as astrologers, this theory accounts for the fact that, as reported in the New Testament, only the wise men saw the star. While the three planets grouped together would shed unusual brightness, the average observer might not notice them, while the wise men, as astrologers, would.

The extra comments in this article were carried in a 1962 edition of the Putnam County Sentinel and in an article by Nancy Cline in the Sentinel.

Merry Christmas! And a Blessed and Happy New Year to All!