

The Long Story of Salvation

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Imagine if this was all we knew about the birth of Jesus! These 8 verses tell a story well enough but it is not the Christmas Eve story to which we are so accustomed. Matthew's story of Jesus' birth is pretty spare. Eight verses in Chapter 1 – that's it. Chapter 2 of Matthew's gospel immediately takes up the story of Herod and his encounter with the wise men from the East. And so it is intriguing indeed to reflect a little on the scope and impact of this very short account of Jesus' birth.

There are no shepherds, no heavenly host of angels praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest." There is no stable or innkeeper or census mentioned just a somewhat terse introduction, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." In what way? Like this: "When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." The narrator does not tell us who found this out, how it happened or even what Mary thought about it. Instead, just before Joseph is about to quietly break off their engagement because of Mary's pregnancy, he has a dream. In the dream Joseph, not Mary, is visited by an angel. It is Joseph who gets the explanation as to what is happening and how to proceed with God's plan.

Mary doesn't utter a word throughout the whole story. There is no pondering on Mary's part, no praise to God for being blessed with the privilege of carrying the Christ Child in her very own body. The narrative is short and to the point: "When Joseph awoke from his sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her [Mary] as his wife but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus." There is not much Christmas pageant material here.

No, there isn't but what we find in Matthew's story of Jesus' birth is a profound telling of the world's salvation story. In this birth narrative all of our history with God is pulled together to produce an unbroken chain of faithfulness and relationship. To me Matthew's story is a story about eternity. For you see, the first 17 verses of Matthew, the part that comes before the story of Jesus' birth, is a genealogy that goes far back, all the way to Abraham himself. The 42 generations listed tells the entire Old Testament story and ends with this: "Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah." (1:16) From Abraham to Jesus the story of God's faithfulness throughout all of Israel's history is brought to that present time 2000 years ago. It is a sign of past hopes from Isaiah, that "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." From that moment Jesus grows and carries out his ministry in Palestine, teaching and leading in such a way as to have an impact on humanity forevermore. To me that speaks of eternity.

Matthew's story of the baby Jesus is a story about eternity; never-ending life with God. From Abraham to Joseph to Jesus and out into the world forever - past, present and future all wrapped up in the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God is with us. This is the story of salvation that links all of our bible stories together in an unbroken chain of God's

grace and it is the story that connects all of us to that long, long story. And for you genealogy experts or those who caught it: since Joseph was not the biological father of Jesus - it was the Holy Spirit who made this possible - the unbroken chain of relationship in the end does not have to do with bloodlines but rather with love lines. Joseph took the angel's advice and overcoming any fear or culture condemnation followed God's direction and kept love alive and moving.

So it is through Matthew's account of Jesus' birth that we have such a Good News story, a long story that ties us to God and God to us in an unbroken covenant of love, joy, hope and peace. Glory to God in the highest heaven. God is with us. AMEN