



THE STORY OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS

(Matthew 1-2; Luke 1-2)

The story of the birth of Jesus, also known as the Nativity, is a foundational event in the Christian faith, celebrated with great reverence, especially in the Catholic tradition. It is a story of divine love, humility, and the fulfillment of God's promises. The accounts of this miraculous event are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke, each providing unique details that together form a complete and awe-inspiring narrative.

The Annunciation: A Promise from God

The story begins with the Annunciation, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. The angel Gabriel was sent by God to a young virgin named Mary, who lived in the small town of Nazareth. Mary was betrothed to a righteous man named Joseph, a descendant of King David. When Gabriel appeared to Mary, he greeted her with the words, "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" (Luke 1:28). Mary was greatly troubled by these words, wondering what they could mean.

Gabriel reassured her, saying, "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 the 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" (Luke 1:30-33).

Despite her initial fear and confusion, Mary responded with deep faith and humility, saying, "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word" (Luke 1:38). With these words, Mary accepted God's will, and the Word became flesh in her womb.

The Visitation: Mary and Elizabeth

Soon after, Mary visited her cousin Elizabeth, who was miraculously pregnant with John the Baptist. When Mary greeted Elizabeth, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She exclaimed, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" (Luke 1:42-43).

Mary, filled with the Holy Spirit, responded with the Magnificat, a beautiful hymn of praise to God for His mercy and faithfulness. This encounter between Mary and Elizabeth is a powerful reminder of the joy and wonder that accompanies God's work in the world.

Joseph's Dream: A Protector is Chosen

In the Gospel of Matthew, we learn about Joseph's role in the Nativity story. When Joseph discovered that Mary was pregnant, he was deeply troubled, knowing that he was not the father. Being a just man, he did not want to expose Mary to shame, so he decided to divorce her quietly. However, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:20-21).

Joseph, being a man of great faith, obeyed the angel's command. He took Mary as his wife, thus becoming the earthly guardian of the Son of God. This act of obedience and protection would play a crucial role in the events that were to unfold.

The Journey to Bethlehem: Fulfilling Prophecy

As the time approached for Mary to give birth, the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus issued a decree that all the world should be registered for a census. Joseph, being of the house and lineage of David, had to travel to Bethlehem, the City of David, to be registered. He took Mary with him, even though she was near the time of delivery.

When they arrived in Bethlehem, the town was crowded with people who had come for the census. Joseph and Mary searched for a place to stay, but there was no room for them in the inn. Finally, they found shelter in a humble stable, where animals were kept. It was here, in these lowly surroundings, that the Savior of the world was born.

Mary wrapped her newborn son in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals. This humble beginning was in stark contrast to the grandeur one might expect for the birth of a king, yet it perfectly reflected the humility and love of God, who came into the world not to be served, but to serve.

The Announcement to the Shepherds: Glory to God in the Highest

On the night of Jesus' birth, shepherds were keeping watch over their flocks in the fields near Bethlehem. Suddenly, an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. The shepherds were terrified, but the angel reassured them, saying, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:10-12).

As the angel spoke, a multitude of the heavenly host appeared, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" (Luke 2:14).

The shepherds, filled with wonder and joy, hurried to Bethlehem to see this great thing that had happened. They found Mary, Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger, just as the angel had said. The shepherds glorified and praised God for all they had heard and seen, and they spread the word about the child, and all who heard it were amazed.

The Visit of the Magi: Gifts for the King

In the Gospel of Matthew, we read of another group who came to honor the newborn King—wise men from the East, known as the Magi. They had seen a star rising in the East, which they recognized as the sign of the birth of a great king. They traveled a long distance, following the star, to find the child.

When they arrived in Jerusalem, they asked, "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" (Matthew 2:2). Their inquiry troubled King Herod, who feared the prophecy of a new king. He called together the chief priests and scribes and asked where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it is written by the prophet" (Matthew 2:5).

Herod, pretending to be interested in worshiping the child, sent the Magi to Bethlehem, asking them to return and report the child's location. The Magi continued to follow the star until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they entered the house, they saw the child with Mary, his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. They offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh—symbols of his kingship, divinity, and future suffering.

Warned in a dream not to return to Herod, the Magi departed for their own country by another way. Their visit fulfilled the prophecy that nations would come to the light of Christ, and kings to the brightness of his dawn (Isaiah 60:3).

The Flight into Egypt: Protecting the Child

Soon after the Magi departed, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, saying, "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt, and remain there till I tell you; for Herod is about to search for the child, to destroy him" (Matthew 2:13). Joseph immediately obeyed, taking Mary and the child by night and fleeing to Egypt.

Herod, realizing that the Magi had deceived him, was furious. In a rage, he ordered the massacre of all male children in Bethlehem who were two years old and under, in a futile attempt to kill the one he saw as a threat to his throne. This tragic event, known as the Massacre of the Innocents, fulfilled the prophecy of Jeremiah: "A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and loud lamentation, Rachel weeping for her children; she refused to be comforted, because they were no more" (Matthew 2:18).

Joseph, Mary, and Jesus remained in Egypt until Herod's death, after which the angel again appeared to Joseph, instructing him to return to the land of Israel. Fearing Herod's son, Archelaus, Joseph was directed by God to settle in Nazareth, a small town in Galilee. This fulfilled what was spoken by the prophets: "He shall be called a Nazarene" (Matthew 2:23).

The Hidden Years: Awaiting the Mission

The Holy Family lived a quiet and humble life in Nazareth, where Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52). These hidden years were a time of preparation for Jesus' public ministry, during which he would reveal the fullness of God's love and mercy to the world.

The story of the Nativity is a powerful reminder of God's love for humanity. In His infinite wisdom, God chose to enter the world as a helpless child, born in humble surroundings, to a virgin mother. The Nativity invites us to reflect on the mystery of the Incarnation—God becoming man—and to respond with the same faith and humility shown by Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, and the Magi.

For Catholics, the Nativity is more than a historical event; it is a living reality that we celebrate every year at Christmas. It calls us to prepare our hearts to receive Christ, just as Mary prepared a place for Him in her womb. It challenges us to recognize the presence of Christ in the poor, the humble, and the marginalized, just as He was found in a manger. And it inspires us to follow the example of the shepherds and the Magi, who sought the Savior with hearts full of faith and love.

As we contemplate the Nativity, let us ask for the grace to welcome Jesus into our lives with the same joy and reverence, and to share the good news of His birth with all we meet. May the story of Jesus' birth continue to inspire us to live out our faith with renewed devotion, knowing that the Savior of the world has come to dwell among us, bringing peace, hope, and salvation.