

Lesson 2 Lecture
Matthew 1:18 – 2:23; Luke 2:1-52

Candy canes and Christmas, what can be more traditional? Yet, there's some traditions I grew up with I just couldn't find in the Bible, like the little drummer boy serenading baby Jesus, Mary riding on a donkey, a surly innkeeper with a "no vacancy" sign, wise men visiting the stable, or animals quietly watching while baby Jesus slept.

But in the gospels of Matthew and Luke, I *did* find excitement, deity, and humbleness in the Babe of Bethlehem's birth. Let's pray.

As the nativity story begins, Joseph and Mary are pledged to be married. That ancient Israel relationship is often confused with *our* culture's being engaged but it was far more stringent. Pledged to be married was a contractual agreement. Only death or divorce could dissolve it. A pledged couple was considered husband and wife even though the wedding ceremony, living together, and consummation of the marriage would not occur for about twelve months. Contrast that to today's Bridezillas who threaten to leave fiancés if the ring isn't pretty.

Let's talk about Joseph. Joseph was a common workingman – a woodworker – probably not well off financially and lived in the small village of Nazareth. Joseph's actions, his faith, and the part he played in Jesus' life were significant. Joseph believed the messages God delivered to him and he obeyed them. Of all the men in Israel, God chose Joseph to raise the most important Child ever born – God's only Son. Joseph was also *righteous* which meant he lived in *uncompromising* obedience to the Torah. He didn't eat food the Torah said was unclean, mix with the wrong kinds of people or keep his carpentry shop open on the Sabbath to make a few extra drachmas.

Joseph learned Mary was pregnant. *How* she became pregnant was unbelievable – even blasphemous! He thought Mary had been unfaithful. Jewish law said because of her unfaithfulness, Mary could be put to death by stoning. Righteous Joseph had a dilemma. He couldn't take Mary as his wife, but Joseph had compassion; he couldn't bring himself to publicly expose what he thought was Mary's sin. Fortunately, their culture allowed a marriage pledge to be dissolved through divorce so Joseph chose to divorce Mary – quietly – which meant without the public knowing why. Joseph wanted to be merciful to Mary even before God dispatched an angel to interrupt his sleep.

In his dream, an angel greeted him, "Joseph, son of David". Prophecy said the Messiah would be a descendant of David. *Joseph* was a descendant of David, and through Joseph, who would become Jesus' legal father, *Jesus* became a descendant of David. The angel assured Joseph that Mary had not lost her virtue and he was to take her home as his wife.

The angel's words, "What is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit", are profound – essential to the fundamental doctrine of the Christian faith. Jesus was conceived, not by an act of man, but the act of God. Jesus retains His full deity because the Holy Spirit conceived Him

in the virgin. Jesus was born fully human, yet sinless God, and because He is sinless, He could die as the substitute for our sins. What a miracle that God could add a human nature to His own and still remain God.

Joseph's obedience was immediate. He committed himself to Mary and to the baby who would be called Jesus. Joseph had faith he was part of God's plan.

Mary and Joseph lived in Nazareth yet prophecy said the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. God intervened. He used the Roman government to fulfill prophecy. Citizens were required to register for a census in their ancestral hometowns. Joseph's was Bethlehem, and to Bethlehem Joseph and his wife journeyed.

Luke states Joseph and Mary were pledged to be married when they went to Bethlehem, but remember, Joseph's dream angel told him that he and Mary were to take each other as husband and wife and he obeyed. Although, it was *customary* to complete a waiting period, they were still considered husband and wife, but they did not consummate the marriage until after Jesus' birth.

Scholars, historians and archeologists tell us where they believe on that first Christmas, "the little Lord Jesus laid down His sweet head".

Shepherds tended their flocks in open fields under a starry canopy, clans and families arrived in caravans to register for the census in Bethlehem and every house was brimming with occupants filling every conceivable lodging space.

In Israel, some houses had two levels and some were built on slopes with cave-like stables below. In both types of houses, families and guests stayed in the upper level. At night, the stables or lower levels became animal shelters and contained straw-filled mangers or feed troughs. Joseph sought lodging with his relatives in Bethlehem, but the guest room was already occupied when he and Mary arrived. Joseph and Mary found lodging where the animals hung out at night and thus, the home's animal shelter became the birth room and nursery for the prophesied Savior.

The Messiah, Creator of the universe, was born in humble surroundings and given an animal feed trough for a cradle. Our Savior's first home on earth smelled like a barn.

It was a holy night but it wasn't silent. When the animals started lowing and mooing, surely there was a piercing cry of a newborn.

The helpless baby was God He needed to be fed and nurtured. He didn't come out of the womb using words like kingdom, righteousness, or propitiation. Jesus had to learn to say the first century Jewish equivalent of mama and dada. He was born of a woman and he went through stages of development like other human babies. Why emphasize Jesus' humanity? Because, while remaining fully God, Jesus became fully man. Jesus' humanity means He is fully able to identify with us.

The scene shifts from the baby King to common shepherds outside under the stars. Shepherding had become a despised occupation. Shepherds were on the bottom of the social

ladder; not even permitted to testify in court. But God chose to reveal the Savior first to these shunned outsiders because He chooses common people in whom to display His grace.

With their sheep tucked safely away in pens, it was just an *ordinary* night to these *ordinary* shepherds. But our God loves to hook *extra* on the front of ordinary.

The shepherds were likely relaxing in front of a fire when the dark night exploded with brightness. A mighty being appeared in “the glory of the Lord.” The brilliance and perfection and intensity of this *glory* must have been overwhelming.

I love the King James Version here. It says the shepherds were sore afraid. That's an understatement! As we heard from Dan last week, when an angel first appears, usually his first words are, “Do not be afraid” because fear was a common reaction. Angels appear as bright as lightning and are God’s warriors so they may look quite imposing. The shepherds were probably scared out of their sandals.

The magnificent angel was sent to deliver good news. When was the last time you heard *good* news? After dinner one night, a wife said to her husband, “Honey, shall we watch the six o’clock news and get indigestion or wait for the eleven o’clock and have insomnia?”

The good news the *angel*/delivered was a joy-filled birth announcement. In one breath the angel exclaimed, “a Savior has been born to you; He is the Messiah, the Lord.” And thus, God’s titles became the baby’s.

Some of us were given a name because of its meaning; Grace, Hunter, Joy, Rebel. My name means “pearl.” I guess it fits because I’ve always been round. Carol’s name means joyous song. Almighty God gave His Son specific names because they explain His purpose for coming to earth.

JESUS: SAVIOR

- Jesus, Greek for the Hebrew name, Yeshua, means "The Lord Saves." His name signifies the very essence of His being – He is the Savior. In Luke 19:10 Jesus said He came into the world “to seek and save the lost”.

MESSIAH: THE CHRIST

- In Hebrew, Messiah means the Anointed One, the Promised Deliverer. In English, the equivalent is Christ. The name “Jesus Christ” is the same as “Jesus the Messiah”.

IMMANUEL

- Immanuel is more a title than a proper name. It means “God with us.” The God who spoke the world into existence, the God who rules over all creation, the God who myriads of angels continuously worship, the God whose glory is beyond our imagination, the God whose holiness is beyond our comprehension, this is the God with us.

The frightened shepherds may have calmed a bit, but their fear factor jumped again when *suddenly* the heavens opened and heavenly hosts appeared. Heavenly hosts are God's angels, His servants, countless in number, who dwell in His presence and form His celestial army. The sky was filled with these mighty beings and they joined in an anthem of praise to God. Can you imagine what that sounded like? It was a miracle the shepherds remained conscious! God chose to reveal the birth of the Messiah, our Savior, His Son, to a motley crew of sheepherders before anyone else on earth.

The good news was delivered and the heavenly host returned to heaven. After their departure, the shepherds didn't say to each other, "Wow, that was a great light show" and return to tending sheep. Instead they said, "Hurry, let's check out what the Lord told us." Max Lucado wrote: "The shepherds were not sheepish. It wasn't enough to see the angels. The shepherds wanted to see the One who sent the angels." The angel left them with a sign – proof – to distinguish the divine new born from other babes born that night. They would find *Him* in a feed trough.

The shepherds may have been forbidden from testifying in court, but these social outcasts became evangelists and told everyone about the angelic visit and finding the Christ Child.

The Messiah had been born. The shepherds returned to the fields and Joseph and Mary returned to Nazareth. On the eighth day of his life, Joseph circumcised and named their baby. Jesus' earthly parents didn't have to consult a book of baby names because Jesus' *heavenly* Father already named Him.

Joseph and Mary then traveled to the temple in Jerusalem because new parents were required to perform two ceremonies. Forty days after giving birth, new mothers sacrificed a lamb or birds, in a ceremony called purification.

Another ceremony was the dedication. The ceremony symbolized giving the firstborn son to the Lord. Shekels, or coins, were given to redeem, or buy him *back* from the Lord. These ceremonies were typical for devout Jews. What made them not typical was that Jesus the Messiah would ultimately fulfill the prophetic representation of these ceremonies.

It was a common sight to see new parents carrying their newborns through the temple. There was nothing extraordinary about Joseph, Mary or their newborn; however, the faces of two devoted servants of God lit up with joy when they saw this special family in the crowd.

Simeon and Anna were in the temple every day waiting for God to reveal the long-awaited Messiah – the "consolation of Israel." Led by the Spirit, they recognized Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise that salvation would come to Jews and Gentiles.

But before the new family left the temple, Simeon had foreboding words specifically for Mary. He prophesied that the Child who had been miraculously conceived within her by the Holy Spirit, would be the cause of division in Israel. Some would respond to Him, others would oppose Him. And the image of a sword symbolized heart-piercing sorrow Mary would experience as the mother of the Messiah, which we know would be the rejection of her son by

Israel and His crucifixion. One wonders just how much Mary and Joseph understood God's great plan for this miracle Child.

Several months pass and Matthew tells us about star-gazing travelers called wise men or Magi. They were astrologers; high-ranking officials.

Remember the Christmas carol about three kings? Scripture doesn't say they were kings – more likely advisors to kings and Scripture doesn't say there were three of them. That tradition may have started because they gave three gifts to Jesus. Actually, there were probably *several* Magi in a large caravan of servants and military escorts on the long journey to find the newborn King. The preparation for, and then the journey to Jerusalem, may have taken the Magi several months, perhaps a couple years. By the time they arrived, Joseph and Mary were then living in a house and Jesus, no longer a baby but a child, was about 2 years old. What brought these students of the stars to Jerusalem and then to the child Jesus?

When the Magi were still in the east, they may have squinted in disbelief when they saw something in the sky they had not seen before – brilliant and shining – they called it a star. They believed it was a sign that a king was to be born. Many months and hundreds of miles later, while standing before a stunned King Herod, the Magi referred to this astronomical anomaly simply as, "his star", meaning the baby King's star.

It's uncertain what the star was. Theories are that it was a conjunction of planets, a supernova, a comet. Over and over the Bible baffles our curiosity about just how certain things happened. As believers, does it matter how the star moved, how the Red Sea split, how the manna fell, or how *any* miracles of God happen? Instead, John Piper suggests we focus on: "the holiness of God, the ugliness of sin, the helplessness of man, the death of Christ, grace not works, the sanctifying work of the Spirit, the expectation of Christ's return."

Standing before King Herod, the Magi asked where the king of the Jews was born. Oooh . . . not a good question to ask the ruler who was paranoid, jealous, maniacal, cruel, murderous – and those were his *good* qualities. *Herod* was king of the Jews and he had no intention of sharing his throne. From the moment this thug dug his fingernails into the armrest of his throne, he held onto power with all his military might.

When Herod was disturbed, everyone was disturbed – because people died. He had already annihilated the Sanhedrin and slaughtered three hundred court officers. He killed many of his own family, including his *favorite* wife and his firstborn son.

Herod consulted religious leaders who told him the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Remarkably, those experts didn't care to check out the rumor of the new King's birth. Herod secretly summoned the Magi to learn exactly when the star made its appearance. Knowing when the star appeared gave him an indication how old the newborn King was. He wanted to locate the baby – not to worship, but to destroy. Warren Wiersby wrote, "The Magi were seeking the King; Herod was opposing the King; and the Jewish priests were ignoring the King."

The Magi left insincere Herod, and as they started toward Bethlehem, they were overjoyed to see the star again. Many translations state, they “rejoiced”, with “exceeding great joy.” What was all that joy about? Put yourself in the Magi’s sandals. Seeing the star again reassured them they were still being led to the newborn King. They followed the star and it “stopped over the place where the child was.” Could God create a unique star or light to guide humans and then have it hover over the very house the Son of God was in? Of course! When they arrived at the house, nothing hinted of royalty, yet, these important men bowed down on the dirt floor before a Jewish baby, worshiped Him and presented Him with treasures.

Some scholars feel there was deliberate symbolism in the gifts they gave Jesus; gold for royalty, frankincense for a priest, and myrrh, an embalming spice, for one who is to die. But these worshipers may have simply presented these costly gifts to honor Jesus as a king. In God’s providence, the gifts may have had a practical value for the blessed family. When Joseph was warned in a dream to flee to Egypt, he obeyed immediately, and the gifts received from the Magi were likely the means by which Joseph took his family to Egypt and sustained them there until God told them to return.

The Magi were also warned in a dream not to return home by way of Jerusalem. Herod had something diabolical in mind for the information he was expecting from the Magi. Given the size of their caravan, Herod knew the Magi couldn’t approach Jerusalem without being noticed and then he realized the Magi defied him. He didn’t know exactly where the new King was, but he knew in what city He was born.

Based upon when the Magi said the star first appeared, Herod determined the newborn’s threat to his throne was around two years old. He ordered his troops to kill every male child in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and younger. I’m sure the soldiers didn’t check birth certificates and undoubtedly were indiscriminate in their killing spree of male babies. Scripture explodes in grief. Matthew includes a lament from one of the most sorrowful times in Israel’s history. Hundreds of years prior, Rachel, who represented Israel’s mothers, wept for Israel’s people. Matthew referred to her as a representation of Bethlehem mothers who could not be comforted because their baby boys no longer existed.

God again directed Joseph in dreams. He was told to return to Israel and warned him about the new ruler, Archelaus, horrible Herod’s son and heir. Joseph returned his family to Nazareth. Nazareth was a town that was humble, ridiculed and rejected, just as the Messiah would be.

In Nazareth Jesus “grew and became strong, was filled with wisdom, and God’s grace was on Him”. This statement is an excellent prelude to an incident in Jesus’ adolescence that further supported how unique the young Messiah was.

A visit to Jerusalem with His parents for the Passover reveals much about Jesus, then just twelve years old. During Passover, Jerusalem would swell from about 25,000 inhabitants

and visitors to nearly 100,000. For the festival, families and friends would travel together to and from Jerusalem.

Assuming Jesus was with friends or relatives, it was probably not until they made camp the first night of their journey home did Joseph and Mary realize Jesus was missing. Immediately they returned to Jerusalem. No disrespect intended, but Mary and Joseph must have felt badly losing the Messiah.

Has anyone here temporarily lost a child or grandchild? Sheer panic doesn't come close to what it feels like – the "what ifs" that surge through your heart and then, relief floods over you when you find them. However, if the child discounts your concern, emotions can surge to anger.

After one day's journey back to Jerusalem and a day looking for Jesus amid the throngs of people, Joseph and Mary find Him in the temple discussing Scripture. The 12-year-old astonished the rabbinical teachers with His theological insight and questions, but note – He amazed everyone with what He understood and with His answers to their questions. This was something like a middle-school child discussing physics with a rocket scientist. Jesus did have a unique advantage though. He had a special relationship with the Author of Scripture.

Mary's scolding was understandable, "Son, why have you treated us like this?" The first recorded words of Jesus are noteworthy, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" Perhaps Luke recorded Jesus' response to convey that even at His young age, Jesus acknowledged He was the Son of God because the temple was *His* Father's house.

Jesus returned home with His parents and obediently resumed life in Nazareth. There He grew in wisdom, in relationships with others and with His heavenly Father. Isaiah's prophesy about the Messiah is strikingly similar: "The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of council and of power, Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." Isaiah 11:2

And as she did following the birth of Jesus, Mary cherished each event in her astonishing son's life, trying to understand what it all meant.

Last week, Dan challenged us to make a list of: "What Jesus Teaches Me About God" for each lesson. For me, this brought great joy focusing on God's characteristics. So here's my list:

- ◆ God intervenes In dreams, to protect Jesus, to fulfill prophecy
- ◆ God loves common people Joseph, Mary, shepherds
- ◆ God astonishes When the heavenly host appeared
Those who heard the shepherds' and Simeon's testimony
The Magi because of the star
The people who heard Jesus in the temple

The birth of God's Son is a love story – a story of God's love – for us. And thus, we are set for the gospel story. The story of how the world received the God-man when He left His earthly parental home to enter His heavenly Father's ministry. It will focus on the common people who come in contact with Jesus. I hope you're looking forward to studying how all the parts fit together and how Jesus fulfilled all things His Father expected of Him in the roles given to Him at His birth – Savior, Messiah, Lord God.