

Sermon: The Christmas Story as you may not have heard it told before

Intro/

I wonder what your favourite part of the Christmas Story is? Do you like hearing the prophecies from the Old Testament? Or do you like listening to that passage from the beginning of John's Gospel that reminds us that right at the very beginning of creation Jesus was the Word and that He was with God and that He is God? Jesus didn't just come into being when He was born in Bethlehem that night – Jesus has always existed.

Or perhaps you like watching the Nativity Plays? And last week we were treated to a wonderful service that celebrated the first Nativity, weren't we? Our youth group did an amazing job didn't they?

Or perhaps you like to just read the different stories in the Bible and think about them? How Mary was visited by the Arch Angel Gabriel and told she was going to give birth to the Son of God. How amazing that must have been! I mean Mary was probably only about 14 or 15 years old at the time, but what an amazing faith she must have had. She didn't waver, did she? She didn't really even question it – just 'How? How can this be?' she was just a young girl – she wasn't married with a husband – so how could she get pregnant? But when Gabriel told her that it would be the work of the Holy Spirit she says, 'Ok'.

Or perhaps you like the bit where Mary goes off to stay with her cousin Elizabeth who's also pregnant through a miracle. Mary may have been sent there for a bit so as to get away from all the gossip and judgemental attitudes of her village. But as she arrives at Elizabeth's we're told that Elizabeth knew immediately what had happened to Mary and who she was carrying – we're told that Elizabeth's baby jumped for joy in her womb, as even he recognised the unborn baby Jesus.

Or perhaps you like the actual birth story itself, with the angels and the visit of the shepherds – and we're gonna unpack this part a bit more in a minute.

Or perhaps you like the visit of the Magi – the Wise Men or Astrologers from what was then called Persia, and what's today called Iran. In this part of the story, they follow a star from Persia right to Jerusalem and then on to Bethlehem. This was no ordinary star – this was probably a coming together of 3 specific stars which in itself was another prophecy

or sign that a very special king had been born. It must have been much bigger and brighter than any other star and it must have moved in such a way that those astrologers just had to set out to follow it. Their journey could have taken up to two years. Jesus was a toddler when they arrived to worship Him. Matthew gives us a clue about this anyway, doesn't he? Because he says that the Wise Men came to the house and when they went in, they saw the child there with His mother. The little family had settled in Bethlehem for a while.

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But to understand all this properly, I think we need to understand what it meant at the time

So, if you want a title for today it's this – 'The Christmas Story as you may not have heard it told before.'

A couple of years ago, a friend bought me a book called 'The Rock, The Road and The Rabbi.' And it's a book about Jesus and His life written by a Messianic Jewish Rabbi. Now a Messianic Jew is a Jew who believes in Jesus and who follows Jesus as well as holding on to most of his Jewish beliefs and practices as well. He understands and recognises that Jesus is the Messiah and that Jesus fulfils all the Old Testament prophecies about the Messiah – and a Rabbi is a Jewish teacher and leader.

We're told that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. Now Bethlehem was a small Jewish town about 6 miles from Jerusalem and about 80 miles from Nazareth, where Mary and Joseph were living at the time, and Bethlehem was the birth place of King David. This is why Joseph had to go to Bethlehem in the first place when he had to go and fill in the Census forms – it was because he was a descendant of King David, and everyone had to go to their ancestral home town.

Now a journey of 80 miles would have taken Mary and Joseph about 4 days. Can you imagine being heavily pregnant and either walking or riding on a donkey or sitting in a cart pulled by a donkey for all that length of time? It must have been extremely uncomfortable for Mary and then when they arrive in Bethlehem there's nowhere for them to stay! How stressful was that? What were they gonna do? The baby was coming too!

Let's go to the Shepherds' Fields at Bethlehem. The Shepherds' Fields are still there today, just outside the actual town. When we visited Bethlehem some years ago, we weren't allowed into the Shepherds' Fields area as it

is now occupied now by the Arabs and we ran the risk of being stoned if we got too close – but at the time of Jesus' birth, the Shepherds' Fields were where the sheep were kept who were to give birth to the lambs that would be raised ready for the sacrifices that had to be made at the Temple – and near these fields were caves that were used for the birthing of those lambs. The caves were kept in a state of ritual purity and cleanliness ready for the lambs to be born in. These lambs also had to be kept ritually clean and spotless and so when they were born, they were wrapped in swaddling cloths in order to keep them clean and pure and so they didn't damage themselves on the jagged rocks. If they were damaged in any way, then they were no good for the sacrifices in the Temple.

So, they weren't just ordinary sheep – and those shepherds weren't just ordinary shepherds either – they were what's called Leviticus Shepherds – Shepherds from the Priestly Tribe of Levi – and these shepherds had the job of raising animals that were pure enough to be used for sacrifice in the Temple.

So, on that night of miracles, we see these shepherds, out in the fields, taking care of their sheep – when suddenly the skies are lit up with the bright lights of Angels – singing and praising God for what had just happened nearby and they gave the shepherds 2 signs: that they would find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths; and that He would be lying in a manger. And all this was to be highly significant for those shepherds!

First of all, they would have seen Jesus wrapped in the swaddling cloths just like one of their lambs that was destined for a sacrifice.

Now Rabbi Sobel, who wrote in the book I mentioned earlier, says that the cloths were significant too – he says that they could well have been strips of cloth from the garments of the Temple Priests. You see, because these robes were considered to be holy, they couldn't just be thrown away when they got too worn for Temple duties and so they could have been torn up for the shepherds to wrap their lambs in. He also suggests that when Mary visited Elizabeth, that Elizabeth gave some of Zechariah's Priestly garments to use for wrapping Jesus in – so the shepherds see Jesus wrapped up like this, not in just any old cloth, but in the same Priestly cloths that they used for their lambs.

So here we see the baby Jesus born in the same place as the lambs for sacrifice in the Temple and being wrapped in the cloths that came from the same old Priestly garments.

When we look at something from the Jewish perspective, and in this case from the perspective of a Messianic Jewish Rabbi, then that kind of throws a different light on the stories that we've grown up with doesn't it? Because our perspective comes from our western world perspective and not the Middle Eastern Jewish perspective of 2000 years ago.

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But there's more!

Our western perspective puts all this as happening in December, doesn't it? But we also need to come at this from a different perspective. We're told that the shepherds were in the fields at night watching their sheep! But they wouldn't have been in the fields in December! It was too cold then, and the sheep would have been inside somewhere. Jewish tradition says that it is more likely that Jesus was born in September – specifically at the Feast of Tabernacles! Now the Feast of Tabernacles is the Jewish Festival to commemorate the time that the Israelites wandered in the wilderness after God had brought them out of Egypt, and each September Jewish people still build temporary shelters to live in during the holiday and they remember how God provided them with Manna to eat and how he led them with the pillar of cloud during the day, and fire at night.

If Jesus was born at the Feast of Tabernacles, this makes much more sense of that verse in John's gospel that says, 'And the Word became flesh and tabernacled among us.'

Messianic Jewish thought also says that Jesus was probably conceived in December and that this happened around the Feast of Hannukah! And it was at this Festival, later on, that we see Jesus saying that He is the Light of the World. At Hannukah the Temple was ablaze with lights.

Now the life of Jesus revolved around those important Festivals –

He died as the Passover Lamb at Passover

His resurrection was on the Festival of First Fruits

And He poured out His Spirit at Pentecost.

So, it makes sense that the Festival of Hannukah and the Festival of Tabernacles were also part of His life story, doesn't it?

End/

So, to finish, I'd like to read a few words from Rabbi Sobel's book,

'So, the shepherd priests, who encountered angels, went to a place where the lambs were used for the sacrifices, were born and swaddled. There they saw the baby Jesus swaddled like a sacrificial Passover lamb in Priestly garments that were also used for lighting the Menorah in the Temple, which symbolised the eternal presence and promise of God! Now it should make more sense as to why a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger would be such a significant sign to those shepherds, for it pointed to Jesus being both the Lamb of God, and the Light of the World.'

Those shepherds got it! They got what loads of other people didn't get – and who still don't get – that Jesus really is the Messiah – the One who was prophesied about and who was promised would come into the world as a tiny baby. Jesus really is the One whom the world has been waiting for.

Shall we pray?

Father, we thank you for sending your Son into the world to be our Passover Lamb, thank you that through His coming in the flesh, He has dealt with sin and death for everyone who trust in Him. We offer ourselves completely to You and ask You to be active in our lives this week. Please fill us with courage to face whatever comes to us during the coming weeks as we keep our eyes fixed on the Lamb.

In Jesus' Name.

Amen