



Stories from the Body of Christ with Todd Seifert

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One of the purposes of this podcast is to help people get better acquainted with the Bible, so I think it's appropriate to talk about the start with the birth of Jesus, especially since this episode will air just before Christmas. As much as I love Santa Claus, Rudolph, Charlie Brown's Christmas tree and the redemption of Ebenezer Scrooge, this holiday really is about the arrival of the Christ child, the Savior for all humankind.

The story is told primarily in the books of Matthew and Luke. So we're going to spend some time in this episode going through the entire story, in order, by merging those two books together. I hope you find this educational and entertaining.

Let's get started.

Palestine ... about 4 or 3 before the common era ... BCE

If you're Jewish, life can be difficult. You are living in the land promised to your ancestors, but the land is not yours. It now belongs to the strong and growing Roman empire. The emperor has governors spread across his vast territory. And the emperor, as a way of keeping the peace and paying politically expedient favors, has propped up kings tied to the people being oppressed. Some are more politically savvy and stronger than others.

One king who appears to fit that category is known as Herod the Great. He's not an ethnic Jew, but he was raised in the Jewish faith by his father, a friend of Julius Caesar. Herod the Great would go on to become one of the grandest builders of all time, constructing grand cities across what we now know as Israel. He restored the grandiosity of parts of Jerusalem, and among his greatest accomplishments was the tremendous expansion and grand refurbishing of the Jewish temple there.

Seven is an important number throughout the Bible, and it's going to play a role in our story, too. For it's in that temple that our Christmas story — told in 7 acts — actually begins.

Our first act of the story of the birth of Jesus really starts with news of the birth of his cousin, John — we'll talk about him further when he's an adult known as John the Baptist.

John's mother, Elizabeth, and his father, Zechariah, a priest, both were considered blameless in their observance of the Lord's commandments. So even though, as we learn in Luke 1:7, they were very old, they find out they are going to have a son. But they find out in a very unique way.

Zechariah is chosen by lottery to go into the temple's Holy of Holies, where Jews considered God's very presence to exist. It was a huge honor.

Anyway, while he was offering the incense offering, an angel appears directly to the right of the altar. The angel, who identifies himself as Gabriel, tells Zechariah that his son will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. Luke 1:16-17 says,

He will bring many Israelites back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> He will go forth before the Lord, equipped with the spirit and power of

Elijah. He will turn the hearts of fathers<sup>a</sup> back to their children,  
and he will turn the disobedient to righteous patterns of thinking.  
He will make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

In other words, his son won't be the long-awaited Messiah, but he will prepare the way for the Messiah. The people have been waiting about 400 years for this to happen — about 10 to 12 generations.

Zechariah does what I suspect a lot of us would do. He asks “How can I be sure this will happen? My wife and I are very old?”

The Angel Gabriel responds “I was sent to speak to you and to bring this good news to you. Know this: What I have spoken will come true at the proper time. But because you didn't believe you will remain silent, unable to speak until the day when these things happen.”

Sure enough, Elizabeth finds out she is pregnant and keeps it to herself for about five months. But just 30 days later, the world will start to change forever.

Our second act takes place in Nazareth, north of Jerusalem, and it involves that same angel, Gabriel. He gets to be the bearer of baby news throughout this story.

Let's read what the Bible has to say from Luke 1:26-38.

When Elizabeth was six months pregnant, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee, 27 to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David's house. The virgin's name was Mary. 28 When the angel came to her, he said, “Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!” 29 She was confused by these words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. 30 The angel said, “Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. 31 Look! You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. 32 He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father. 33 He will rule over Jacob's house forever, and there will be no end to his kingdom.”

34 Then Mary said to the angel, “How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?”

35 The angel replied, “The Holy Spirit will come over you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy. He will be called God's Son. 36 Look, even in her old age, your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son. This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive' is now six months pregnant. 37 Nothing is impossible for God.”

38 Then Mary said, “I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said.” Then the angel left her.

I want to pause for just a moment to stress just how huge this news is. It's a virgin birth — truly a miracle. That alone is worth noting. But how Mary takes this news shows she was a cool customer — and a devout servant of God. We don't really know how old she was, but tradition tells us she was very young, probably a teenager younger than 16.

Don't judge. It was a different time in a different culture. Girls got married far younger then because — let's be honest — people didn't live as long.

We also don't know how old Joseph was. Some commentaries guess that he was an older teenager. Others say he was, perhaps, in his 30s. Still others say he was possibly an older widower.

The point here is that these two were betrothed to be married. And suddenly Mary finds herself pregnant with a child that is not Joseph's. It's grounds for scandal, for ridicule, possibly the end of her life — or at least any kind of quality of life — in an era when life is tough enough. Mary does what I think a lot of young girls would do as she tried to come to grips with what was happening and getting her head around what to do next. She went away to family.

Our third act begins with Mary hurrying to a city in what is identified as the Judean highlands, to the home of a relative. And that relative's name was Elizabeth.

Remember her? She is the mother-to-be of John the Baptist that we met at the beginning of our story.

We read about a brief encounter from Luke 1:39-45.

Mary got up and hurried to a city in the Judean highlands. <sup>40</sup> She entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. <sup>41</sup> When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. <sup>42</sup> With a loud voice she blurted out, "God has blessed you above all women, and he has blessed the child you carry. <sup>43</sup> Why do I have this honor, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? <sup>44</sup> As soon as I heard your greeting, the baby in my womb jumped for joy. <sup>45</sup> Happy is she who believed that the Lord would fulfill the promises he made to her."

These two pregnant relatives can support each other. How were they related? Some translations say they were cousins, but if they were they were likely not first cousins. Remember, Mary is a teenager and Elizabeth is beyond typical child-bearing years. So Elizabeth could be an aunt, or a distant cousin. Regardless, they are relatives, and they each are carrying important little boys.

Mary stays there about three months — or possibly until Elizabeth gives birth — and then Mary heads home ... to face her new reality.

We'll focus on Mary in just a few moments, but we'll wrap up Elizabeth's part of this story first. Luke 1:57-66 says:

When the time came for Elizabeth to have her child, she gave birth to a boy. <sup>58</sup> Her neighbors and relatives celebrated with her because they had heard that the Lord had shown her great mercy. <sup>59</sup> On the eighth day, it came time to circumcise the child. They wanted to name him Zechariah because that was his father's name. <sup>60</sup> But his mother replied, "No, his name will be John."

<sup>61</sup> They said to her, "None of your relatives have that name." <sup>62</sup> Then they began gesturing to his father to see what he wanted to call him.

<sup>63</sup> After asking for a tablet, he surprised everyone by writing, "His name is John." <sup>64</sup> At that moment, Zechariah was able to speak again, and he began praising God.

<sup>65</sup> All their neighbors were filled with awe, and everyone throughout the Judean highlands talked about what had happened. <sup>66</sup> All who heard about this

considered it carefully. They said, "What then will this child be?" Indeed, the Lord's power was with him.

So Zechariah, the priest who lost his ability to speak when he questioned the angel Gabriel, suddenly can talk again. What does he do? He shares a prophecy made known to him. He has some poignant words for his son in verses 76-79:

You, child, will be called a prophet of the Most High,  
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way.  
77 You will tell his people how to be saved  
through the forgiveness of their sins.  
78 Because of our God's deep compassion,  
the dawn from heaven will break upon us,  
79 to give light to those who are sitting in darkness  
and in the shadow of death,  
to guide us on the path of peace."

We learn that this child, John, grew up to be strong in character. He lived in the wilderness until he began his public ministry, and we'll hear about what happens 30 years later in future episodes.

When we come back to In Layman's Terms, we'll continue our Christmas story with the parts you're probably much more familiar with. We'll venture to Bethlehem, right after this.

Act 4 begins with us briefly in the book of Matthew. I know, it can be confusing. Why use two different books to tell this story?

Well, think of the gospels as eyewitness accounts. They are stories told from the perspectives of people who were there but told to specific audiences for specific reasons. It's like if we were to have four of us go to ... let's see, a NASCAR race. One of us is high in the stands. One of us is in the press box. One of us is in the trailer park in turn 4, and the other is on pit road.

We would all see the race, but we would see it from different perspectives. And the people who tend to be in those locations have some differences, so we may each have slightly different audiences.

Those kinds of factors and differences hold true for the gospels as well.

Anyway, to Matthew. Mary has returned from staying with Elizabeth, and she is probably more and more obviously pregnant. We'll pick up at Matthew 1:18-24.

This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place. When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit. 19 Joseph her husband was a righteous man. Because he didn't want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly. 20 As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, don't be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled:

23 Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son,  
And they will call him, Emmanuel.<sup>[a]</sup>

(Emmanuel means “God with us.”)

24 When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife.

I want to pause just a moment to give some props to Joseph here. This poor guy often gets shoved to the side of the story, to a marginal role.

Notice that he showed instant obedience to God. He took Mary as his wife as soon as he woke up from the dream.

He knows he is the stepfather to the son of God —That’s pressure.

OK, now we bounce back to Luke, this time the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter, verses 1 to 7.

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. <sup>2</sup>This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. <sup>3</sup>Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. <sup>4</sup>Since Joseph belonged to David’s house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David’s city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. <sup>5</sup>He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. <sup>7</sup>She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

Yes, the story of Jesus’ birth takes place amid a call for taxes. People in those days had to travel to their cities of origin to be counted and to have taxes assessed. The Romans had to pay for those paved roads, baths and aqueducts — and the armies oppressing the people.

So they Joseph and a very pregnant Mary travel to Bethlehem, about 97 miles — this was no overnight trip on foot.

Some biblical translations say the baby was laid in a manger, meaning there is an implication that the baby was born in a stable because quote “there was no room for them in the inn. Just who was this mean innkeeper? Our nativity sets and images almost always reflect that idea that Jesus was born in a stable because the innkeeper couldn’t make way for a pregnant lady. Makes you angry doesn’t it?

But that probably isn’t quite the way it happened.

You see, hospitality would have been essential in Jewish culture then as it is now. And they would have been traveling to see family. The word for inn very well could be translated to mean home, or guestroom. And in houses in this era, animals often had one level or dedicated space, so the owners could keep them safe and care for them a little easier. People lived in another level of the home. And cribs never have been something every family just happens to have. I know we don’t have one in our house, so if someone needing a crib showed up, we would be scrambling to put together blankets, pillows and baskets to fashion into a crib or bed. In first-century Bethlehem, it’s possible that such a scramble led to bringing up a manger from where the animals were, stuffing it with straw and blankets to create a bed for a newborn.

It's still a manger. It's still a humble beginning for the ruler of God's kingdom. But it probably wasn't in a stable.

When I traveled to Israel in early 2019, I had the opportunity to tour the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, which is now in Palestinian territory. It's a beautiful church, with ruins underneath the church visible for visitors to see. A golden star marks the spot where at least some people think this blessed event took place. Our group was able to sing Christmas carols as we stood in that space. It was an experience that generated all kinds of goosebumps, a truly holy experience.

Act 5 of our story takes place not far from there, in the hills around Bethlehem — which by the way is far from a flat city. These days, the area around it is known as "Shepherds' Fields," and it's where our story picks up in Luke 2:8-20

Nearby shepherds were living in the fields, guarding their sheep at night. <sup>9</sup>The Lord's angel stood before them, the Lord's glory shone around them, and they were terrified.

<sup>10</sup>The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. <sup>11</sup>Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup>Suddenly a great assembly of the heavenly forces was with the angel praising God. They said, <sup>14</sup>"Glory to God in heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors."

<sup>15</sup>When the angels returned to heaven, the shepherds said to each other, "Let's go right now to Bethlehem and see what's happened. Let's confirm what the Lord has revealed to us." <sup>16</sup>They went quickly and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they reported what they had been told about this child. <sup>18</sup>Everyone who heard it was amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>Mary committed these things to memory and considered them carefully. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned home, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Everything happened just as they had been told.

These shepherds are the first people outside the family to visit, recognize and worship Jesus. Can you imagine what that must have been like? You're in a field doing your job, when all of a sudden a choir of angels appears and not only dazzles you with light but gives you specific instructions on how to find the Christ child. Amazing — and maybe a little scary. But this was news they had been waiting for — like so many other Jewish people — for 400-plus years. They immediately left for Bethlehem, down the hill/mountain, to see this amazing baby.

When we return to In Layman's Terms, we'll conclude our Christmas story by looking at what happens after Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus finish what they had to do in Bethlehem.

Welcome back. We're telling the Christmas story this week, kind of like a story with 7 acts. We're up to Act 6 of our story.

It's eight days after Mary has given birth. As was custom, Mary and Joseph bring baby Jesus to the temple to be circumcised and to be given his official name.

Two people there recognize —with the help of the Holy Spirit — the importance of this child. The first, a man named Simeon, is described as righteous and devout, a man who had eagerly awaited the restoration of Israel.

Simeon tells the parents.

“This boy is assigned to be the cause of the falling and rising of many in Israel and to be a sign that generates opposition <sup>35</sup>so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your innermost being too.”

Another person, Anna, was known as a prophet. She was an 84-year-old widow who, scripture tells us, never left the temple area and worshipped God by fasting and with prayer day and night. Verse 38 tells us that:

She approached at that very moment and began to praise God and to speak about Jesus to everyone who was looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Then, we read that Mary and Joseph, having completed their duties required under the Mosaic Law — those rules in the first five books of the Bible — returned to their hometown of Nazareth in the part of Israel known as Galilee.

That sounds like the end of the story, right? But wait? What about the three wise men? Well, let’s talk about them. They’ll be Act 7 of our story. But they didn’t visit Bethlehem. They probably never ran into those shepherds who came to see Jesus the day he was born. Let’s see what the Bible has to say from Matthew chapter 2.

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in the territory of Judea during the rule of King Herod, magi came from the east to Jerusalem. 2 They asked, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We’ve seen his star in the east, and we’ve come to honor him.”

3 When King Herod heard this, he was troubled, and everyone in Jerusalem was troubled with him. 4 He gathered all the chief priests and the legal experts and asked them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They said, “In Bethlehem of Judea, for this is what the prophet wrote:

6 You, Bethlehem, land of Judah,  
by no means are you least among the rulers of Judah,  
because from you will come one who governs,  
who will shepherd my people Israel.”[\[a\]](#)

7 Then Herod secretly called for the magi and found out from them the time when the star had first appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem, saying, “Go and search carefully for the child. When you’ve found him, report to me so that I too may go and honor him.” 9 When they heard the king, they went; and look, the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stood over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were filled with joy. 11 They entered the house and saw the child with Mary his mother. Falling to their knees, they honored him. Then they opened their treasure chests and presented him with gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 Because they were

warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they went back to their own country by another route.

This is the star we talk about in the Christmas story. It's why we have stars atop our Christmas trees today.

Where did those wise men, the magi, come from? And who were they? Some scholars think they were mystics intrigued by the star. Others say they were astrologers or even scientists for whom the star captivated their attention.

The Bible says they came from the east, but it doesn't say how far east. It could be as close as modern-day Iraq and as far away as modern-day India. Either way, the shortest distance is about 970 miles, or about a month's walk, and that's if it's all on the back of a camel.

We also don't know how many there were. The old hymn "We Three Kings" makes a guess, but it's just based on the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. I've heard some pastors suppose that these travelers must have been important — at least enough to gain an audience with the king of the region — and probably were larger in number than three, or else they wouldn't have caused a stir. It's more likely there were dozens of them, which in turn means they would have taken longer to travel to Nazareth.

If you read Bible commentaries, many of them seem to settle on the idea that the magi visited when Jesus was between 18 months and 2 years old.

Look again at the scriptures about the shepherds and then the magi. It's clear the shepherds see a baby. That's the word used. But the magi see the mother and her child, a word that means the boy was older than a baby, though we don't know exactly how old.

In the end, it doesn't really matter. These magi would not have been Jewish, but they came to find and worship a Jewish boy that they knew would be something truly great one day. They made one heck of a long journey and then took steps not to let the increasingly unsteady king of the region — Herod — know where they had found the baby, thus helping save Jesus' young life.

That's the story of Christmas — when Jesus came into the world as a baby boy to live among us. Eventually, he will teach us. He will show us what it means to love and to stand up for the marginalized. He will talk about the Kingdom of Heaven and how he is the key to that grand, eternal resting place. But He will stress that we are supposed to be agents of loving change so the Kingdom of Heaven can be found right here on earth, in this creation.

In Layman's Terms is going to take some time off for the holidays. I hope you and your family have a very merry Christmas and a prosperous and happy new year. In January, we'll start digging into the teachings of Jesus through what are called parables — stories that help us better understand what Christ was trying to teach us about how to live and how to treat each other.

Grace and peace to you this holiday season.

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Thanks again for listening.

Until next time, please do what you can to help make more disciples of Jesus Christ. You can play a small part in helping change a life.

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