

CHRISTMAS 2021

LUKE 2:15-20/ 1-14

The ***beginning of any story*** is the most important part of a story. And the Christmas Story in the Gospel of Luke is no different, since the beginning sets the stage for who, what, when, where and how.

Who? Mainly *Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus*, and also the angels, the shepherds, and other supporting, characters good and bad.

What? The Gospel is about *Jesus*, and the Christmas story is how his birth came about.

When? We are told that the story takes place in the reign of *August Caesar* of the Roman Empire and *Governor Quirinius* of Syria.

Where? *Bethlehem*.

And how? The angel Gabriel tells us, "*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, Mary and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.*" That doesn't help much, but at least we know that it's God's doing.

Luke liked to parallel his story of Jesus with John the Baptist. That is why the story goes back and forth at the beginning, but Jesus is still the main character.

Notice the use of **symbols** throughout Luke's story - which can be either things, or people, and yes, even angels. Symbols are important because they are powerful, they are simple, and people are familiar with them; like, for example, a Thanksgiving turkey. Mention turkey and most people will think of Thanksgiving. But notice, I didn't use the *Stop Sign* as an example, because that's, well, a 'sign'. Also, using a symbol save a lot of words.

For example, the word **angel**, actually means messenger; even in Latin and Hebrew the word for angel simply means messenger. You may be familiar with Evangelium or Evangelist, which in Greek breaks down into "ev-" which means good in Greek, and "angelium" which means message or news, and put together is our word for "The Good News," or Gospel. Angels bring good news from God; like the angel Gabriel, good news that a Savior is born in the city of David.

Unfortunately, Augustus Caesar also prided himself in proclaiming the “Good News” of bringing peace to the world. But the angels’ of God proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth **peace** to those on whom God’s favor rests.” I don’t think the angels’ message included Caesar, since he thought *he* was god (which was probably corrected in the next life).

The message of the angels was to the **shepherds**, another great symbol. At the time of Jesus, the shepherds were not in very good standing. Unfortunately, they were considered thieves and not to be trusted. Most were hirelings, since by then the land was owned by others. But when the people hear the word shepherd, it still symbolized for them King David, who was a lowly shepherd himself. That is key to understanding this symbol, Kind David, who became the shepherd of Israel which now points to Jesus, the Good Shepherd. The symbol of shepherd also reminds us that God’s message was meant not only for the kings and princes of the world but the lowly shepherds as well as us!

Another word that is mentioned twice is **swaddling clothes** which is the symbol of Jesus’ burial shroud. This baby did not come to replace Augustus Caesar. That is the difference between the Good News of Augustus Caesar which was imposed by Roman military might. This vulnerable baby placed in a feeding trough and announced to lowly shepherds in the middle of the night promised a peace that will last, but not of this world.

The last symbol is the **manger**, from the French word, which means a feeding trough for animals to keep their food. This symbol, believe it or not, is the main symbol in the whole gospel of Luke because of what it point to, which is the Eucharist, Jesus, who will become food for the world. If you read this gospel carefully, the word manger is mentioned three times. Any symbol, word, or phrase that is mentioned three times is very important, as when Jesus mentioned three times that he must suffer and die but rise again.

The Good News is that Jesus specifically gives us his peace right after his resurrection. We now share that peace in the Eucharist before we receive his body and blood. Jesus, the King not of this world, becomes the bread of life foretold by angels and witnessed by the shepherds, food for the world, as reminded by the baby in the manger.

Peace!