

I. Introduction

Merry Christmas! If you have been out shopping, you have probably seen the Christmas decorations at the department stores, at Osaka Station and other places. It is fun to hear Christmas music in the streets and to see the crowds enjoying the Christmas lights, but it is sad that many people do not know what Christmas is all about. In this season, it is important to take time to think about the true meaning of Christmas.

Matthew 1:21 is a good place to start. An angel appears to Joseph in a dream and says, concerning Mary, **“She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins.”** What is Christmas about? It is about the coming of Jesus and the gift of salvation that He gives freely to all who believe in Him.

People who are unfamiliar with the Bible often wonder how Jesus could have the authority and power to save the world from sin. We know that even the wisest and most powerful human beings are limited. No human being has authority over all of the world and certainly not over all of history and the future. Even worse, all human beings do things that are wrong. **Romans 3:10** tells us, **“As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one.”** And it is clear that if human beings cannot stop themselves from sinning, then no ordinary human being can save us from sin.



But Jesus is not an ordinary man. Jesus is Lord and God, come into this world to bring salvation. The Scriptures are very clear that only God has the power to save us. Seven hundred years before Jesus was born, the prophet Isaiah recorded these words in **Isaiah 43:10-11**, **“You are my witnesses,’ declares the LORD, ‘and my servant whom I have chosen, so that you may know and believe me and understand that I am he. Before me no god was formed, nor will there be one after me. I, even I, am the LORD, and apart from me there is no savior.”** There is only one Savior. There is only one God. And He is Jesus. The Creator God came into this world in the person of Jesus Christ to provide for our salvation.

This was the plan of God from the beginning, even before God created the world. In **2 Timothy 1:9b-10**, Paul tells us. **“This grace was given us in Christ Jesus before the beginning of time, but it has now been revealed through the appearing of our Savior, Christ Jesus, who has destroyed death and has brought life and immortality to light through the gospel.”** In the promise of God, grace was given to us in Christ before the world was created.

In the Old Testament, we have the record of how the plan of God was gradually revealed. The coming of a Savior who would defeat the devil and all of his works was promised shortly after the first human beings, Adam and Eve, fell into sin. In **Genesis 3:15** God declares, **“And I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and hers; he will crush your head, and you will strike his heel.”** The NIV translation says “offspring” but the original Hebrew literally says, “the seed of the woman.” We know that the woman has the egg and the seed comes from the man. So, the meaning of the prophecy is that, just one time in history, a woman will give birth without the seed of the man. A virgin will give birth and her child will be the Savior.



Many prophecies in the Bible are repeated. In this case, **Isaiah 7:14** repeats the prophecy that a virgin will give birth. **“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.”** Here there is something new as well; the Savior will be called Immanuel, which means, “God with us.”

Isaiah follows this up in **Isaiah 9:6**, saying, **“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”** All of these things are fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We rejoice that His

government is not a temporary earthly government, but instead it is the eternal Kingdom of God.

The prophets also revealed information about the time when the Messiah, the Savior, would come. **Genesis 49:10** says, **“The scepter will not depart from Judah, nor the ruler’s staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs and the obedience of the nations is his.”** This may seem obscure and hard to understand to us. But at the time when Jesus was born, it should have been clear to the Jews. The scepter of the ruler was the symbol of his authority and the tool by which he announced his judgments, especially judgments of life and death. In all of the history of the tribe of Judah, they had always had a ruler who retained authority over his own people. Even in the Babylonian captivity, the leader of Judah judged his own people. But at the time of the Roman Empire, this authority was taken from the Jews. Just at the time when Jesus, the true King of kings, was born.

Daniel 9:25 is another prophecy that tells when the Messiah will come. **“Know and understand this: From the issuing of the decree to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven `sevens,' and sixty-two `sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble.”** The sevens refer to weeks of years, so seven and sixty-two sevens added together means 69 weeks of years, or 483 years. After the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity, a decree was issued to rebuild Jerusalem. Anyone who counted 483 years from the time of the decree would know that it was time for the Messiah to appear. This prophecy predicted the very day when Jesus entered Jerusalem surrounded by people declaring Him to be King and Messiah (John 12:13). But the leaders of Israel did not, or would not, accept this and they demanded that the Romans crucify Jesus.

Jesus’ suffering and crucifixion was also spoken of by the prophets hundreds of years before it happened. For example, **Isaiah 53:5** says of the Savior, **“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.”**

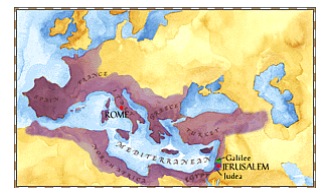


The prophets also spoke of the resurrection in advance. **Psalm 16:10** says, **“because you will not abandon me to the grave, nor will you let your Holy One see decay.”** There are many more prophecies about the Messiah that were fulfilled by Jesus, but, already we can see that there is powerful evidence that shows that Jesus is the true Messiah and that He is Lord and God. For those who are interested, there is more information about these things in the books in the church library and on the book cart.



Some of these things might seem like a different topic than Christmas, but to understand the true meaning of Christmas we need to know who Jesus is and why He chose to come down from heaven and be born into this world. On Christmas Eve, we will talk more about his birth, but for today, let’s take a look at the story of the annunciation.

It was the time of the Roman Empire and the Jews hated the burden of Roman taxes and the constant presence of Roman soldiers in their land. They cried out to God for help. They wanted a Messiah to free them from the Romans, but God had a much bigger plan. God planned to provide salvation from sin and death for the whole world.



Two thousand years ago, sheep were grazing near the town of Nazareth, as they still do today. Even under Roman rule, life continued, people married, worked, had kids, and dealt with all of the issues of life. A young girl named Mary was engaged to be married to Joseph. In that time an engagement was a serious commitment, breaking the engagement was the same as divorce. Of course, the couple could not live together or be intimate until after the wedding, but other than this, an engagement was very similar to being married.



One day, an angel appeared to Mary and her world was turned upside down. Catholic tradition says this event occurred at Mary’s childhood home. So the Catholics built this beautiful church, the Church of the Annunciation, at the site. On the other hand, the tradition of the Greek Orthodox Church is that the angel appeared to Mary at the town spring



in Nazareth while she was drawing water. So, they built the Church of Gabriel at that site.

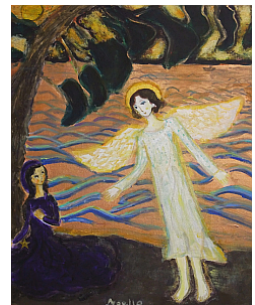
There is some disagreement about the exact site where Gabriel appeared to Mary, but all sources agree that it was in the town of Nazareth. In Jesus' time, Nazareth was a small town with a bad reputation. And yet, God chose a young woman from Nazareth to bear the Christ child. Let's read the story of the Annunciation, Luke 1:26-38.

II. Scripture Luke 1:26-38 (NIV, 1984)

[26] In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, [27] to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. [28] The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." [29] Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. [30] But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. [31] You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. [32] He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, [33] and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." [34] "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" [35] The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. [36] Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. [37] For nothing is impossible with God." [38] "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

III. Teaching #1

Noelle has been doing Christmas paintings for us each year. Here is this year's painting of the scene of the Annunciation. Can you imagine being there when the angel appeared? The angel's sudden appearance must have been amazing. But it is an even more awesome thought to consider that the Creator God who made the heavens and the earth cares about each and every one of us. He watches over us. He participates in our joys and sorrows, weeping with us when we weep, and rejoicing with us when rejoice. God had been watching over Mary for a long time. Now He sends Gabriel to tell her that she has been chosen for a very special role in God's plan.



Gabriel comes to Mary, greets her, and tells her not to be afraid. And then Gabriel says, **(from Luke 1:31-33), "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."** Mary is to be the mother of Jesus, the long-awaited Messiah who is the Son of God. And He will reign forever. His kingdom, the Kingdom of God, will never end.



Mary asks, **(Luke 1:34), "How will this be,"** Mary asked the angel, **"since I am a virgin?"** Mary's question contains no hint of doubt. As startled as she is, she believes what Gabriel has said, but she wonders about how these things will be accomplished. Mary is asking out of faith, not out of doubt. Gabriel answers her, saying, **(Luke 1:35), "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."**

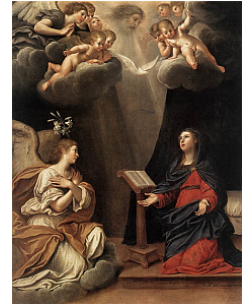
That a virgin will have a child is a miracle, but the big miracle is that the child is the Son of God. Jesus is the eternal Son of God come into this world in the flesh to share our suffering and to bear our sins on the cross. In the Gospel of John the miracle is explained like this. **John 1:1-3, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."**

John makes it clear that the eternal Word is the Creator God. Because God is a Trinity, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, the Word was both God and with God. And in **John 1:14**, we are told, **"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who**

came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

After Mary receives the news from the angel, she goes to visit Elizabeth. Notice what she said to Elizabeth in **Luke 1:46-48**, **“And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed,"** Mary truly is blessed; for 2,000 years she has been called the, “Blessed Virgin,” and that is good and appropriate. But notice what else she says. Mary says, **“my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.”** Mary knows she needs a Savior.

In fact, we all need a Savior. We all need Jesus. By the time Mary returned to Nazareth, her pregnancy was probably starting to show. She would have faced a lot of criticism; there was even the possibility that she might be stoned for breaking the law. But Mary was willing to face whatever was coming because she trusted in the Lord. This is shown very beautifully in her reply to the angel Gabriel in **Luke 1:38a**, **“I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said.'”** Francesco Albani's 1645 painting shows the face of God looking down from heaven at Mary, the blessed woman of faith.



IV. Conclusion

Mary trusted in the Lord completely and was willing to do whatever the Lord asked of her. Mary knew God's love. What about us? Do we know the love of God? God shows His love for us in many ways, but the greatest proof of God's love is seen in Jesus, and especially in His birth, death, and resurrection. Jesus left the throne of God in heaven to come into this world, born as a baby, on that first Christmas day. In this world, Jesus walked the long and lonely road to the cross where He died for our sins. He did it for us, that we might have eternal life in heaven with Him. And, on the third day, He rose from the dead, proving that death and sin had been defeated.

Let's finish for today with a reading from **1 John 4:9-16**.

“9 This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. 10 This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins. 11 Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. 12 No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. 13 We know that we live in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. 14 And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son to be the Savior of the world. 15 If anyone acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God lives in him and he in God. 16 And so we know and rely on the love God has for us. God is love. Whoever lives in love lives in God, and God in him.”

What is Christmas about? It is about the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. This Christmas, I pray that each and every one of us, and also our families, friends, and neighbors, will turn our hearts to God and invite Jesus into our lives. Let's all trust in God and His plan of salvation, just as Mary did. Let's pray.

V. Closing Prayer