

Christmas Celebration Story

Selected Scripture

Introduction

I want to tell you a story that started in the far past. Many years ago, long before you and I had memories, there lived a man and a woman—we know them as Adam and Eve. Innocence was the word that defined that time. Happiness and joy were as common as honeybees in a field of sun flowers. It was a time of exploration and discovery, where every new thing was a thing of pure delight. Never did the joy fade nor the delight found in even the most common of objects ever dim.

They played, actually they worked, but it seemed like play in the world made for them by the one True God. They were at the top of creation, caring for a new universe filled with mysteries and glories tucked away by its Maker. And all of it for their discovery and for them to learn to rule over it all.

It was a time of effortless worship in all things and in every way. The man and woman enjoyed the company of their Creator and God. Fellowship was sweet and contentment soaked deep into the innermost parts of their souls.

But then came darkness.

It did not come by accident. No. It came because the enemy of the Creator does what true enemies always try to do, and that is to destroy what is loved. The enemy was, and still is, Satan. The lies he said are the same lies he tells us today. Is God true? Does God want the best for us? Can we trust His promises and does He know the way of life?

The woman listened to Satan. She let her heart lean in to hear and consider and was deceived. But the man. Oh, that man! No deception for him, simply a choice. A choice to obey his Creator or follow the voice that called him to rebel. And he chose rebellion. As the crowning point of creation this man, Adam, represented the whole of humanity but he also affected the whole of creation. And on that day what was once straight now became crooked and what was once very good became evil. And darkness settled over the universe. And as the darkness settled we saw three great foes of old rise up to rule the cosmos—sin, Satan and death.

Well, God is holy and God is just and so God must confront this wholesale rebellion. And He did. Each actor in this cosmic drama received rebukes and judgments. And to this day those judgments afflict us but they are so common that we don't even notice them anymore.

But though God is just and holy He is also ever so gracious. His love is beyond measure and His ways are always good. And so there was a promise in the midst of judgment. There would come one man, a new Adam if you will, who would come from a woman. This man would destroy the power of Satan and vanquish those great enemies that none of us can stand against.

The story unfolds.

From this dreadful backdrop God begins to paint a picture. And like all pictures the beginnings are not always clear. Lines are established and then erased. Backgrounds are laid down and then mostly covered over. Hues and shades; shadows and details are all set onto God's canvas.

That is how you must read the bible. It is a fantastic and glorious picture that shows the master strokes of our sovereign God laying down His plan to redeem His people from their slavery to sin, Satan and death.

Well, there was a man who lived in a land called Ur—we know it as Iran today. And he was called out by a god he did not know to come and follow this Him to a land that would be his and his peoples'. But this was no ordinary god of the valleys or mountains. This was Yahweh, the one, true God! The maker of all things and the One who set the stars in the sky and the oceans in place.

But God also said that through this man, Abraham, all the nations of the earth would find blessing. And so Abraham had many sons. But the one son that mattered was the one given him by God; a son named Isaac. And then Isaac was given the same promises that his father received. And Isaac had sons, but only one mattered and his name was Jacob. But then, after a major encounter with God, God announced that He would change Jacob's name to one we all know—Israel.

And Israel had many sons and they had sons and grandsons and great grand sons. But they all lived and died and the curse on this universe continued. And the people wondered when would this one promised Son come to save them?

Well, wars were waged and countless men, women and children died. Pestilence ate away healthy limbs and teeth were shattered and bodies were

ravaged and lies were told and murders plotted. Every time there seemed to be hope realized it fell back under the weight of sin and death. And Satan continued to roam the earth devouring whom he desired.

But, and with any story that is a true story, there is always a but, God was still there and God's promise was still present. And so as the nation of Israel rose to power the one, true God told of how through Israel the nations would still be blessed. Through Israel there would come one Man who would arise to save mankind. But He was still shrouded in mystery. Isaiah, the great prophet, spoke of this One coming from a virgin. But he did not explain why or how. But he gave us a glimpse of something even more amazing. For the name of this virgin-born son would be Immanuel, which in English means "God with us."

But that could not be true could it?

And so Israel continued to follow their father, Satan. Israel went the way of all the nations, pursuing everything and anything but God. And darkness swept over the land and God's judgments were poured out upon the people. For God was still holy and He was still just. But God is also still ever so gracious and so He kept promising that there was coming One who will set all things right. He sent in a veritable river of prophets all calling the people to turn from their rebellion and their false gods and to trust in Him and His promises.

And so we read in Micah, that little prophet, the promise that out of Bethlehem would come the Savior. Born in weakness and born in shame and yet somehow this Savior would be the One who brings forth mercy and justice together. This One promised was called God's Son. He was called a King. He was the One who would judge Satan and destroy sin and death.

But how?

The Old Testament closes with words of hope. But only for those who believe God. And the reason is simple. Those words of hope were like a small candle in the midst of a great darkness. For wars were still waging. Injustice was the order of the day. Babies died and marriages crumbled and cancer spread and plottings were plotted. The evil seemed to always win in the end and the darkness was found to be within the very souls of each person. And our enemies continued to laugh and jeer and mock and spit. Sin, Satan and death marched forward,

shaking their collective fist at that little flame called the promises of God and then God stopped speaking.

But did He?

The bible says that “The grass withers, the flower fades, But the word of our God stands forever” (Isaiah 40:8). And if that is true, then the words of the prophets were still speaking, still promising and still pointing to that little flame of hope. And those few who believed kept on believing. And they lived in the midst of the darkness with hope. And they sat their children and their grandchildren on their laps and told them of that hope.

And generations came and went. They were buried with the countless others with hope buried deep within their breast. Never seeing the hope that was promised but believing it nonetheless. They remembered the lyrics of the prophets speaking and shouting and whispering. And when they closed their eyes for the last time, they were still resting on the promises such as this from Isaiah, “A voice is calling, ‘Clear the way for YHWH in the wilderness; Make smooth in the desert a highway for our God. Let every valley be lifted up, And every mountain and hill be made low; And let the rough ground become a plain, And the rugged terrain a broad valley; **Then the glory of the LORD will be revealed, And all flesh will see it together; For the mouth of the LORD has spoken**” (Isaiah 40:3-5).

And so they sang in their sleep, “Oh come Oh come, Emmanuel and rescue us for we are weary of our sin and we are weary of death.”

Years passed while Israel groaned under the bonds of kings and kingdoms. From the rule of the dreaded Chaldeans to the rise of the Persian empire they ached. But no nation exists forever and their power lies in the hands of the Creator. And so, in time, there rose up a young man named Alexander who led the Greek empire into power. This young boy-general swept away the mighty Persians and, so, the people of God had a new taskmaster that they groaned under. And yet they still sang, at least the faithful ones did, “Oh come Oh come, Emmanuel and rescue us for we are weary of our sin and we are weary of death.”

Then over the course of many years the clash of metal and the cries of the wounded and dying rose up again to the heavens. Blood flowed into the open

mouth of the sod, which greedily drank it as a tribute. Graves were dug and bodies were piled high as the Romans pushed and clawed their way to ascendancy. And the people waited yet some more. Would God keep His promises? Would the One promised from the beginning actually come?

But this is what faith is all about. It is trusting not in itself, but in the One who promises. And the One who promised to send a Savior was God Himself. So yes, the faithful would continue to trust and wait.

So the hope of Israel lay still in the faithfulness of God to His promises; rather than the shifting shadows of the passing desires of man. But God's ways are like a deep well that defies our every effort to plumb its depths. Or as the prophet said, "His thoughts are higher than ours and His ways are higher than the heavens." So in these years of waiting, yea, even centuries, many fell by the wayside. They instead put their hope in the strengths of kings and chariots and swords. Or they turned their hope toward some god who cannot speak, much less deliver.

But then, in the midst of what was nothing other than a run-of-the-mill existence something rather extraordinary occurred: a woman became pregnant. A teenager really. And not even an important teen. She was simply a poor girl, who was engaged to be married and lived in a backwoods, no-nothing town. But a young lady becoming pregnant is not special. But a virgin becoming pregnant while still a virgin—well, that is a whole different matter isn't it?

And on that day, a gleam of light pierced the darkness. Light so pure that on its wings came a joy and a hope that began to then push that darkness away. In fact, in the realm of the spirits, where both the angels and the demons of old dwell, there were whispers that something was afoot. The great angel Gabriel had visited that young lady. Things were declared, promises given and this could only mean that YHWH, the true God, was at work. And so, demons began to snarl and to furiously spit all the while showing great bravado; but to those demons who understood, they found that their hearts of obsidian melted within them.

What was that message from the great Gabriel? ***"Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb, and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever; and His kingdom will have no end."***

This is good news! This is the greatest of good news for any heart to hear! But it was not for the world to hear yet. The Baby had to grow in her womb. A forerunner had to come forth to proclaim and prepare the way of the Lord. And so time continued to move and humanity continued to live and to die. Barley was planted and harvested. Grains were ground upon the stone. Sunsets were observed. Weary heads were laid upon the bed. Flowers closed their multi-colored bonnets at the end of each day. And songbirds sang their sweet songs calling out to the morning to start all over again.

But then this young lady felt the first twinge of pain. She and her new husband found a stable in which to lie and wait. And the pushing began and the age-old curse against Eve came to pass in this sweet girl's body. Sweat dripped, tears were shed and groans were heard all the way to heaven. And a Baby was born. A man-child. His name was Jesus, which means Savior. For that is what He was.

All of heaven peered down upon that little Boy. For He was no simple Boy; He was the Son of God. He was God-made-flesh. This was the grandest of mysteries, planned by God before time was even time. This little baby would be known by the title Emmanuel for in that name the mystery was explained—God with us.

And if you were there. And you had eyes that could see. You would see that the small man-child would grow in wisdom and strength. You would see Him do all sorts of good. Sickness and death were no match for Him. Demons had to obey and flee from His presence. But if you looked very, very carefully you would notice that His gaze was always fixed upon a distant hill of a skull. And then, if you peered even more carefully you saw beyond that hill, another hill. But this hill had a hole in the side of it with a large stone rolled away. But that is another part of this story of stories.

You can read more about it in the bible. Four books within the bible devote themselves to describe His birth, His life, His death and His resurrection. You see, the baby came to do what we cannot do. He came to do all that was good and right to do in life. To perfectly and faithfully obey to the uttermost the will of God.

But that is only part of the rest of the story. He came most importantly to die. There are all sorts of ways the bible describes this little boy who grew up into manhood to be our Savior. He is called the Bread of Life, the Great and Good Shepherd, the Vine, and the Light of the world.

However, none of these descriptions mean anything if He did not fulfill His purpose. To die in our place. To take our guilt and sin upon Himself as only a pure and perfect sacrifice can do. And to drink to the fullest the wrath that was ours to drink. And, so, into the grave He was placed only to burst forth in victory three days later as He had promised. And in doing so He brings life to those who hope in Him alone for salvation and forgiveness. But that shall be a story we can finish on another day. A day we remember His death and resurrection.

Right now we shall sing. We shall sing the kind of song the people of old sang. "Come, Thou long-expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free."