

I think most of us know the plot line of Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* pretty well. Whether we have read the original story, seen it staged at the Guthrie, or watched the many movie versions featuring the likes of George C. Scott, Mickey Mouse, the Muppets, or my personal favorite, Mr. Magoo, all of them tell the story pretty consistently. In the opening scene we are introduced to Bob Cratchit, the overworked, underpaid employee of the miserly Ebenezer Scrooge. We learn that the Cratchit family is poor and their youngest, Tiny Tim, has health problems. Scrooge goes home on Christmas Eve and has a series of visions, visited first by his old partner, Jacob Marley, then the spirits of Christmas past, present, and future. Scrooge is transformed by the visions and wakes up on Christmas morning resolved to be a more generous, caring human being. Cratchit gets a promotion and a raise, which enables Tiny Tim to get the nutrition and care he needs, and everyone, characters and audience alike, resolve to live the spirit of Christmas all year long.

Now imagine that the story gets trimmed down to just the two key scenes – the scene where Scrooge is visited by the spirit of Christmas future and is transformed by the vision of what awaits him if he continues his miserly, greedy ways; and the scene on Christmas morning where Scrooge wakes up, delighted that he has not missed Christmas, and he brings a feast to the Cratchit family and enjoys it with them. That would bring the length of the story down to a more manageable, more reasonable fifteen minutes. We'd still get the key message, that greed is bad and leads to misery and generosity is good and leads to joy. But would you be satisfied with that abbreviated version? Some would, no doubt, since for some shorter is always better. But others would decry omitting the other key scenes, losing the context of 19th century London and the character development of Scrooge and the members of the Cratchit family. These two scenes might be the core of Dickens' story, but they are now ripped out of context and I don't think Dickens would be happy with such an abbreviated version.

Unfortunately, I think this is exactly what we do with Luke's account of the birth of Jesus. The first clue that we do this is evident when the pastor announces the reading of the gospel on Christmas Eve by saying, "A reading from the second chapter of St. Luke." The second chapter? Doesn't the story of Jesus begin with his birth? What happened in the first chapter?

I think that Luke would be disappointed with the way we regularly chop his story of the birth of Jesus down to two scenes – Jesus is born in a stable and angels announce the birth to local shepherds – and omit the preceding scenes that feature Zechariah and Elizabeth intertwined with the story of Mary and Joseph, and the scenes that follow, featuring Simeon and Anna.

Luke begins his account of the life of Jesus like this, "In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth." These two sentences give us a lot of information. We know that Zechariah and Elizabeth are descendants of Abraham, the people of Israel, and that their lives center on the temple in Jerusalem and keeping the law of Moses. That their land is called "Judea" rather than Israel or Judah indicates that it is now a province of the Roman Empire and they are ruled not only by the Roman emperor but also by a ruthless vassal king named Herod who collaborates with Rome in keeping the people of Israel subjugated. Wrapped within these two sentences are the stories of the covenants the Lord God made with Abraham, Moses, and David, the sorrow of destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian captivity, and the hope of a messiah who would restore Israel. All of this information is in just the first two sentences and is important for how Luke tells the story of Jesus. Luke wants us to know that we can't understand what God is doing in Jesus unless we know the context in which he was born.

Luke continues. Elizabeth had been unable to bear children, but an angel promises Zechariah that they will have a son and will name him John. Elizabeth gets pregnant, but before she gives birth, her younger relative, Mary, is visited by an angel and also gets pregnant. They meet, and Mary sings a song called the *Magnificat* that states her child will be a mighty Savior from the house of David. Then the scene switches back to Elizabeth and she gives birth to John, and Zechariah sings a song called the *Benedictus* that states that God has remembered the promise that he made with their ancestor Abraham and that John will be a prophet who will go before the Lord to prepare his way.

THEN we get the two scenes we know so well, that we often refer to as “the Christmas Story”, as if it stands by itself. But when the shepherds return to their fields, the story is not done. To emphasize that Joseph and Mary are part of the people of Israel and keep the law, they circumcise Jesus on the 8th day and then on the 40th day, on their way from Bethlehem back to their home in Nazareth, they stop in Jerusalem to go to the temple so that Mary can go through the ritual purification that followed childbirth and they can dedicate their first-born son to God. In the temple they are met by two elderly people, Simeon and Anna. Again, Luke gives important details. Simeon is from Jerusalem, which centuries earlier was part of the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Anna is from the tribe of Asher, which centuries earlier was part of the Northern Kingdom of Israel. The two of them together represent a united people of Israel. These two witnesses (and in Jewish law it is required to have two witnesses) affirm what had been said by the angels, Zechariah, Elizabeth, and Mary – that in this child, God was present to bring about the redemption of Israel, and not only of Israel, but the whole world, for Simeon’s song claims Jesus fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah -- to be the light of God that shines for all nations, for the Gentiles. Then, showing what a talented author he is, Luke has Simeon let us know that there is more to come in this story. He whets our appetite with a foreshadowing of conflict – “This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.” It’s an invitation to keep turning the pages, to see how all the plot lines laid out in the first two chapters play out through the rest of the story.

Only after all of this does Luke conclude his account of the birth of Jesus, saying, “When they had finished everything required by the law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the favor of God was upon him.”

We do hear the core of the Christmas story on Christmas Eve, but Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus comprises all of chapters 1 & 2. To put on an accurate children’s Christmas pageant, we need to cast not only Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds. There are also leading roles for Zechariah and Elizabeth and for Simeon and Anna. The message is not simply that God has become Emmanuel -- God with us -- in the person of Jesus, but that God is a promise keeper, and that in Jesus God is working out the promises made to Abraham and Sarah, to David and Isaiah. And that means we can trust God to keep God’s promises to us as well.