

The Redemptive Story of Christmas

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"Nativity" by Theodore Kern

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

The Birth of Jesus

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

The Shepherds and the Angels

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the

people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

MEDITATION – The Redemptive Story of Christmas

Dan McAdams is a Psychology professor at Northwestern University. He's been studying life stories and meaning for over thirty years. And he's an expert in what's called "narrative identity." Your "narrative identity" is the internalized story you create about yourself, describing who you really are at the core of your being: where you come from, how you got this way, and what it all means. When we want someone to understand us, we share with them our "narrative identity." It's sort of a highlight reel from key moments of our lives and how we've responded to and interpreted those scenes.

McAdams has found in his research that there's a common theme in people who lead meaningful lives: they're more likely to tell **redemptive stories** as their narrative identity. In other words, they've found a way to weave the good into their story. Negatives are there, but they aren't dwelled upon or definitive. This deliberate movement towards redemption gives their life greater purpose, cohesion, and resolution. Character development emerges from their life story. McAdams has also observed that those who struggle with finding purpose or meaning in life are more prone to tell what he calls "**contamination stories.**" When their life moves from good to bad, the story just stops with the bad. The quest for the good ceases. End of story.

Studies have found these negative narratives lead them to be more anxious, depressed, and stuck in their lives. Feelings of helplessness and defeatism squelch any plot twists or turn of events. When you choose redemption over contamination, you acknowledge and press through the stagnation and suffering until you get to transformation. You keep writing and revising your

story and keep turning the pages to where you finally get to that place of acceptance and personal growth. You summon the courage to rise up and not stay down. Character is forged from the crucible.

The birth narrative of Christ is our narrative story. I like how one scholar put it:

“Jesus is nothing less than the continuation of God’s story of redemptive interaction with his people.”

Christ wants to shape and inform our narrative identity, to become part of our story.

The original players in the Christmas drama are very regular people, even down and out people. Outsiders. A pregnant teenager. Her fiancé, a carpenter. Lower-class shepherds that people generally avoided. A baby in swaddling *cloths*, born in a feeding trough.

Even Caesar Augustus has a role to play in this narrative. He brings everyone to their proper places with the census. What’s interesting is that Jesus brings Caesar to his proper place too. The Roman emperors were given such titles as: Savior of the World. Lord. Son of God. They were hailed for bringing peace to the whole world. The arrival of Jesus sent a message: it was the newborn child that was the true Savior who would bring peace on earth, not Caesar. The little town of Bethlehem would make a stronger mark on history than mighty Rome.

The angels help shape our story too. For a meaningful life, we need a connection that goes beyond the regular routines of our day to day lives. “Fear not,” says the angel, “for see, I am bringing you good news, a good story of great joy for all people.” The angels remind us of something very important: Life won’t always be happy, but it will be joyful. Gloom and despair are dispelled. There’ll be times you’ll be scared, but there’s no reason to be afraid. The angels tell us of the things we really yearn for: Peace on earth. Good will. Glory. God. Christmas joy is big enough for the whole world. Insiders, outsiders, wealthy, poor, and everyone in between are invited to this all-inclusive party.

We learn from Joseph’s story the importance of action, obedience, and honor. Joseph doesn’t speak in Luke’s Christmas narrative, but he acts. His actions speak loud and clear. Joseph helps us with a quiet trust that has follow-through.

We learn from Mary’s story to stop and reflect. To pause and ponder and wonder what God is doing and savor it. Mary teaches us about a slow faith that’s truly mindful and thoughtful. “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.”

The shepherds’ redemptive narrative models for us wonder and curiosity. “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place.” They want to explore and get a closer look. And so, we learn to go from the shepherds. Mary stopped, but the shepherds needed to go and go quickly. They had to leave behind their duties in the fields for something even more important. Being shepherds from Bethlehem, these shepherds tended the sheep that were used for the temple offerings. It was a very important job. Yet they had to leave behind the temple lambs, in order to see the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world.

When you go, you also have to let go. Haste doesn't always make waste. When God gives you the greenlight—you *go*. Take it. The shepherds were moved to decisive action. But they not only went, they also made known what they saw. As Luke tells us they returned "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen."

Finally, and most importantly, there's the Christ child. The ultimate redemption story.

Luke says of Christ's birth: he was wrapped in cloth strips and placed in a manger because there was no place for him.

Of Christ's death Luke says later: he was wrapped in linen cloth, placed in a tomb, where no one had been laid. There was no room for him in the inn, but there was room on the cross.

The good news is that Jesus' story isn't a tragedy, it's a divine comedy—a life defined by resurrection, even when there was crucifixion. Here's the surprise, the plot twist: God meets us in that baby in a manger. And encountering that baby in swaddling *cloths*, we encounter the true power of God. Not the power of Caesar nor the power of the sword, but a power that can bring the power of shalom. Peace that *passeth* all understanding.

From the Christ child we learn about true power—that it's not found in a palace or a temple, but in "a babe bound in swaddling *cloths* in a manger." This same child would later say, "I have come not to be served, but to serve, and to give my life as a ransom for many."

It's a transcendent story. It's out of this world. Miraculous. But it's also an earthy, even gritty story. God becoming one of us. Doing for us what we could never do. Showing us how it's done. How to love God. Love our neighbor. Love ourselves. Love our enemies. And with Christ born anew in our hearts, He acts in us and through us. Turning our "stories of contamination" into redemption stories.

Jesus' story is no run of the mill story. It's a story of love. Of struggle. Forgiveness. Healing. Bringing freedom and deliverance. Purpose to our suffering. Hope. Rescue. Release. Salvation. And joy.

I want his story, to shape my story. And Christ' story to shape your story.

Amen.

Sermon Art: "Nativity" by Theodore Kern, Wardown Park Museum, UK

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