

Have you ever noticed how many stories are told at Christmastime? There is something about this season that lends itself to the enjoyment of good stories—and who doesn't like a good story? We have a limitless number of stories to choose from, including, but not limited to, Charles Dickens' "A Christmas Carol," Clement Moore's "Twas the Night Before Christmas," and shows like "It's a Wonderful Life," "A Christmas Story," all the Hallmark Christmas movies, "A Charlie Brown Christmas," we could do this all day. The song "It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year" even refers to "scary ghost stories and tales of the glories of Christmases long, long ago," hearkening back to a time when entertainment took place through the spoken word, gathered around a fireplace on cold December nights. Then there are the shared stories that we tell each other when we get together with family and friends; some of those stories we know very well (because Grandpa tells them every opportunity he gets), and sometimes we're surprised by a story we've never heard before. We never knew Aunt Margaret went to a Beatles concert when she was a teenager, I guess because no one asked.

The story at the heart of Christmas is a little like that. Whether you've grown up in the church or not, the account of Jesus' birth is both very familiar and potentially surprising, at the same time. The essentials of what happened in Bethlehem are still widely known. The Virgin birth, the humble stable, the image of husband and wife with a baby in a manger, angels, shepherds, these are recognized by many. But the surprise and even the shock comes when we listen to the full story. As it turns out, the narrative of Jesus' birth is told not just once in the Bible but twice; the same event from two different perspectives; the same birth of the child, but it feels like two Christmases, and this is very good news for you and me.

Let's look at them both. The first is what I will call Luke's Christmas, because it's found in Luke's Gospel, and this is the Christmas story that is, without a doubt, the most popular in American churches. Luke's Christmas prepares us for the birth of the Christ Child with the story of the events surrounding another birth, that of John the Baptist. An angel announces that the conception of John will happen soon, which is a big deal, because everyone assumed Zechariah and Elizabeth were past that point in their lives. The mother of the Christ Child also receives an angel who announces the imminent birth of Jesus. The mothers of the

two miracle children greet each other joyfully, amazed at what God is doing through them. A Roman census means Joseph and a very pregnant Mary must travel to Bethlehem, where lodging is scarce, and the best they can do is a stable. There, the baby is born. Mary swaddles little Jesus and his first crib is a feeding box. Angels come to unknown shepherds with the message of the birth of a new King, Jesus the Savior, a signal that his kingdom will include the nameless and disadvantaged. What we think of as “Christmas” is built on Luke’s Christmas; without Luke’s report, there would be no nativity scene for artists to render; no figures to arrange under the tree or in the yard. Luke’s Christmas marks the beginning of Christmas carols: “Gloria in excelsis Deo” starts here, as does “My soul now magnifies the Lord.” And Luke’s Christmas includes the first Christmas sermon: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people. For to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord.” Simply put, Luke gives us THE Christmas Story.

But, as I mentioned, there is another. This I will call Matthew’s Christmas, because it’s found in Matthew’s Gospel, and this Christmas story is nowhere near as popular as Luke’s, for reasons which will become fairly clear. Where Luke’s angels bring good news to John the Baptist’s father and Jesus’ mother, Matthew’s angel breaks into Joseph’s dreams to explain how Mary became pregnant and tells him to marry her instead of divorcing her. This is not necessarily the kind of news that makes a person’s heart leap for joy. Next, some strange scholar/ambassadors show up in King Herod’s court asking about the newborn King of the Jews. Little did they know that Herod protected his throne with murderous intensity, and that their sincere question would lead to unspeakable violence in Bethlehem. Matthew’s Christmas gives us a scheming politician, unafraid to use deadly force to keep power; angels giving instructions on how to escape death, and a holy family on the run. Matthew’s Christmas has not spun off nearly as many quiet songs or pretty cards. It’s a crash course in how Jesus will be treated by the world.

Matthew’s Christmas tells us that Jesus did not have to wait for adulthood to suffer. It was all around. In the stigma of his unwed, pregnant mother; in the stress of Joseph rushing the family to Egypt; in the homicidal hatred of King Herod, there are hints of His coming cross.

So how do we resolve the tension between the two Christmases of the Bible? I’m not sure that we can, or even that we should. Let me explain.

There will times when your holiday and your life in general will resemble Luke's Christmas. "All is calm; all is bright." God's blessings overwhelm you, breaking into your life like the angels surprising the shepherds. The good news of great joy is something you can feel, a current of energy giving life to your faith. Everything seems to fall into place.

On the other hand, there will be times, and maybe that time is now, when your life is a lot more like Matthew's Christmas, a Christmas of trouble and suffering. You can identify with the strain in Joseph and Mary's relationship. You can identify with the mothers of Bethlehem in their grief and sorrow. You can identify with news that completely upsets the flow of your life. Matthew's Christmas says that you are not shut out of what God is doing through Jesus if you're having a hard time right now. Jesus was born into a mess, but He made it right. He has come to make your mess right.

It's probably accurate to say that most of us will experience a Christmas somewhere between Luke and Matthew. While we dream of a Christmas filled with "heavenly peace," and we do find genuine joy in the birth of our Savior, we are also bearing burdens and dealing with complications. Luke wants you to celebrate and be amazed. Matthew wants you to know, this is no fairy tale. These things happened to real people with real problems. Either way, the point is the same: God kept His promise. He sent His Son, Jesus, who was born in Bethlehem. Jesus' mission was to destroy sin and evil without destroying us. He accomplished that mission through his perfect performance of God's Law, His innocent, sacrificial death, and His miraculous return to life. This was done for all people, and if you believe it, you have the gift of knowing how deeply loved you are. This story is unlike any other. To hear it is to hear God's voice. To believe it is to know God's heart. Whether your Christmas is more like Luke or more like Matthew, the truth is, Jesus gave up everything in order to gain you. This is the Christmas story that will be told forever.

