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Christmas Characters: Zechariah

The Christmas story is so well-known that we sometimes overlook the wonder surrounding the event. Surely nothing could surpass the beauty and majesty, the awe and fulfillment, of the Christ child's birth in a stable. It's beyond our understanding how God's Son could leave heaven, come to earth as an infant, and dwell among us.

Jesus Christ is the central character of human history. As someone has said, "History is really His Story." Although the baby Jesus is the main character of the Nativity, there were others who played supporting roles. Zechariah and Elizabeth were critical characters in the unfolding events. Certainly Joseph and Mary were pivotal figures in the birth of Jesus. It's impossible to tell the story without considering the involvement of the shepherds and wise men. There are even two individuals, Simeon and Anna, who made an important appearance eight days after Jesus was born.

These eight characters deserve a second look so we fully understand their key roles in the Christmas Story. Their life stories were part of God's Larger Story – and your life story is, too. As we examine each of the eight characters, we'll focus on how God was orchestrating the events to fulfill His Larger Story of the birth of Jesus.

First, God made sure that Zechariah was chosen to burn incense in the temple. At that time there were about 20,000 priests in the country who were divided into 24 divisions of roughly 1,000 each. Every division had "temple duty" twice a year. As the events unfolded it "just so happens" that Zechariah's division was on duty. Only one priest per day was chosen by lot for the great honor of burning incense in the temple. On that day the lot "just happened to" fall to Zechariah for this once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. It's not too hard to see God's hand

Second, God answered Zechariah's prayer for a child. While Zechariah is inside the temple, an angel appeared by the altar to announce that Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth would have a child. He specifically told Zechariah that the child's name would be John. Although Zechariah didn't know it, we know the child is John the Baptist who the Old Testament foretells will "prepare the way

of the Lord.” Zechariah’s heart’s desire for a child aligned with God’s Larger Story of sending a God-ordained messenger before the Messiah.

Finally, God used Zechariah’s unbelief to confirm that the child’s name was John. After the angel’s announcement Zechariah had a hard time believing it. After all, he and Elizabeth were beyond the child-bearing years. So he questioned the validity of the message. Oops! As a result of his unbelief, Zechariah couldn’t speak for 8 days. At the child’s circumcision they were going to name the child Zechariah after his father. Although Elizabeth couldn’t have known what the angel had told her husband, she spoke up and said, “No. His name is to be called John.” This violated tradition as no one in the family held that name. Using a writing table, Zechariah confirmed that the child was to be called John. Of course, these events also were part of God’s Larger Story.

Sometimes you may think that your life is insignificant when compared to other Christians. At such times remember this truth. Your life is unfolding just as God has planned. Moreover, the story of your life in some way is furthering the unfolding of God’s Larger story – even if you can’t see it now.

Christmas Characters: Elizabeth

The second character in the Christmas story is Zechariah’s wife, Elizabeth. Both she and her husband were direct descendants of Aaron, the first priest of Israel. From Luke 1 it’s clear that Elizabeth was a godly woman well-aware that God was behind these events.

The fingerprints of God are all over the births of Jesus and John the Baptist. For example, did you know that Elizabeth and Mary were relatives (Luke 1:36)? We’re not certain of their exact relationship, but many Bible scholars believe they were first cousins. Therefore, the two men were related, perhaps as second cousins. Their relationship is especially significant when Jesus is baptized. It may have been the first time John recognized that his relative, Jesus, was the Messiah.

When Elizabeth became pregnant, she immediately acknowledged that this blessing was from God. In Luke 1: 25 she states, “The Lord has done this for me ... He has shown me favor ...” Elizabeth knew that God was the One orchestrating these extraordinary events.

Elizabeth also was sensitive to the whispers of God; moreover, she believed what God was telling her. When Mary greeted her relative, Elizabeth felt the baby leap in her womb. After John finished his somersault, Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. She confirmed that Mary was the mother of the Messiah. Before Mary told her, Elizabeth knew that God had revealed to Mary what was about to happen.

Elizabeth recognized that Mary's visit was an incredible blessing from God. In Luke 1:43 Elizabeth asked, "But why am I so favored that the mother of my Lord should come to me?" Imagine Elizabeth's excitement at the realization that Mary - her own relative - was the mother of the Lord. Every young Jewish woman hoped to be chosen for this honor. Now Elizabeth recognized she was in the same room with the mother of our Lord; more importantly, she realized she was in the presence of the Lord Himself.

Finally, Elizabeth was given the privilege of being the first to bless both the Christ-child and his mother. Elizabeth proclaimed, "... Blessed are you [Mary] among women, and blessed is the child you will bear" (Luke 1:42). Later, Elizabeth extends a second blessing to Mary, "Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished (Luke 1:45).

Throughout this portion of the Christmas story, Elizabeth demonstrates her awareness that God is directing the unfolding events. She knows her life story is part of God's Larger Story. She takes no credit for herself, but gives all the glory to God. No wonder God chose this godly woman to be the mother of John the Baptist.

What about you? What events have been taking place recently in your life? If you look hard enough, can you see God's hand in arranging these events? Nothing in life happens by coincidence or happenstance. Every aspect of your life - every experience you've ever had - is part of God's plan for you. Primarily He is molding and shaping you to become more Christ-like; but He also is equipping you to undertake the unique assignment He created You to fulfill. Your life story is unfolding just as God planned; and your life story is an essential part of God's Larger Story.

Christmas Characters: Mary

Apart from the Lord Himself, Mary is the central character in the birth of Jesus Christ. After all, before His birth Jesus spent 9 months in her womb. Her body nourished His life during the most formative stage of His development. Mary is unique as she was the only person in the world who was a blood relative of Jesus.

Truly the deep bond between mother and child is mystery beyond human comprehension.

Why did God choose Mary as the mother of Jesus? Only God knows the answer to this question. But there are a few guesses we can make based on what we know about her. Above all, Mary fulfilled Old Testament prophecies concerning the Messiah. Consider these three requirements to be the mother of Jesus:

First, Jesus must be born in David's royal line. Psalm 89:3-4 states, "You [God] said, 'I have made a covenant with my chosen one, I have sworn to David my servant, 'I will establish your line forever and make your throne firm through all generations.'" Did Mary meet this requirement? Two New Testament passages present the genealogy of Jesus. Joseph's lineage is listed in Matthew 1:1-17 [to be examined in the next post]. Mary's ancestors are documented in Luke 3:23-37. David's name appears in verse 31 of Mary's record. She, and therefore Jesus, met the Old Testament requirement that the Messiah come out of David's royal line.

Next, Jesus must be born of a virgin. Isaiah 7:14 says, "Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel." When an angel promised the birth of Jesus to Mary, she asked, "How can this be ... since I am a virgin?" The angel replied, "The Holy Spirit will come upon You, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (Luke 1:34-35). The angel also reassured Joseph. "... Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20). Mary met this requirement, too.

Finally, Jesus must be born in Bethlehem. Micah 5:2 prophesies, "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." Isn't it incredible that the first census ever taken required everyone to return to their ancestral home? Although Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, they had to travel to Bethlehem, the hometown of Joseph's ancestors. God was behind the scenes orchestrating the events surrounding Jesus' birth. So Mary also fulfilled this requirement.

Mary met all of the Old Testament prophecies pointing to the mother of the Messiah. But there may have been two other reasons God chose Mary for this important role.

First, Mary knew Scripture by heart. Jesus grew up in a home saturated with Scripture. In the Magnificat (Luke 1:46-55), also called the Song of Mary, she praised God in one of the most beautiful prayers in Scripture. It is composed almost entirely of Old Testament verses linked together to form a whole. In fact, its structure and content echoes the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Jesus must have heard His mother recite Scripture throughout His early years.

A final reason for her selection may be that Mary was a woman of faith. After the angel promises Christ's birth through Mary, she replied, "I am the Lord's servant ... May it be done to me as you have said." That statement demonstrated that Mary was a woman of tremendous faith. In fact, Mary is the only person present at the birth, the death, and the resurrection site of Jesus Christ. As Mary herself stated, "From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me – holy is His Name" (Luke 1:48).

Mary's calling – her special assignment of earth – was to give birth to the Son of God. Your calling may not be anywhere near as dramatic, but it's just as important. Every person's unique assignment advances God's Kingdom and His timetable for the end times. What has God called you to do?

Christmas Characters: Simeon

A musical composition often ends with a Coda. It's the final section of music that reinforces the main themes and brings the piece to an end. The story of the birth of Christ doesn't end in the stable. Certainly, Jesus' birth is the main theme of the story, but there also is a Coda.

Eight days after Jesus' birth the family traveled 6 miles to the Temple in Jerusalem. They went there in obedience to God's command, "On the eighth day the boy is to be circumcised" (Leviticus 12:3). They had no idea that God had arranged two "divine appointments" – the first with Simeon, then with Anna. We'll focus on Simeon in this post and Anna in the next.

Simeon was an old man who lived in Jerusalem. Luke 2:25-26 describes him as "righteous and devout" who was waiting for the Messiah. Simeon enjoyed a close relationship with the Holy Spirit who had promised that he would see the Messiah.

As Joseph, Mary and Jesus arrived at the Temple, the Spirit moved Simeon into action. As he spoke to the family, Simeon did two things – he praised God and offered a prophecy. Simeon praised God that, as promised, he had seen the Messiah. In doing so, Simeon verified that Jesus is the promised Christ. He is God’s salvation for all people – for Jews and Gentiles alike.

After he blessed the family, Simeon gave Mary a prophecy. “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too” (Luke 2:34-35). The first part of the prophecy states that there’s no middle ground with Jesus - you’re either for or against Him. The last part tells Mary that her heart will be broken by the people’s rejection of her Son. In fact, Mary will be present at His crucifixion.

Simeon’s “life story” was part of God’s “Larger Story.” Simeon’s life purpose was to verify the identity of the Messiah. Simeon was uniquely qualified for this assignment. He was an older man with time on his hands to wait daily at the Temple for the Messiah. More importantly, Simeon was a godly man – righteous, devout, and sensitive to the promptings of the Holy Spirit. God created Simeon for this task, and throughout his life, God equipped Simeon to be prepared to recognize the Messiah.

It’s not hard to see the importance of the Holy Spirit in these events. First, Luke 1:25 states, “The Holy Spirit was upon [Simeon].” The two of them had a close, personal, and ongoing relationship. Second, the Spirit promised that Simeon wouldn’t die before he saw the Messiah – and by faith Simeon believed it. Third, Simeon heard the Spirit’s prompting that the child with Joseph and Mary was the Messiah. It’s interesting that Simeon’s name means “one who hears.” Finally, the Spirit was behind the scenes guiding Simeon when he praised God and gave Mary the prophecy (see Romans 8:26-27).

So how important is the Holy Spirit to you? Do you have a close, personal, and ongoing relationship with Him? Remember: It’s impossible to live the Christian life in your own strength. You must be filled with the Holy Spirit; that is, you must be fully yielded to His control. Then He empowers you to live a life pleasing to God.

Like Simeon, the Holy Spirit will guide you in fulfilling your unique, God-given assignment. But to complete your work – to live out your calling – you must be sensitive to the promptings of the Spirit. Many believers will back up what I’m about to say. When you walk in the Spirit – when you hear and obey His voice – the

Christian life truly becomes a Great Adventure. Ask God to fill you with the Holy Spirit (Ephesians 5:18) and to use you for His glory (John 17:4).

Christmas Characters: Anna

Have you known people who radiate Christ so much that their faces take on an angelic glow? I've only met a few. There's a woman who teaches classes at my church. When she speaks a "holy hush" falls across the room so people can catch her every word. It's as if her words are directly from God. People know she has a deep relationship with Jesus.

Luke 2:36-38 describes a woman named Anna who was very much like my teacher friend. Anna was a prophetess which in that culture meant she had an unusually close relationship with God. She was 84 years old, about twice the life expectancy of women in that era. Anna had been married for only 7 years when her husband died. She never remarried. Since most women married around age 15, Anna probably had been a widow for about 70 years!

Anna never left the temple but worshipped there night and day, fasting and praying. Obviously, she was a very godly woman. She probably was well-known in Jerusalem and acquainted with Simeon since he was at the temple daily awaiting the Messiah.

Anna approached Joseph, Mary, and Jesus just as Simeon finished prophesying. Whereas Simeon spoke privately to the family, Anna addressed the crowd publicly. She first gave thanks to God, then blessed the family. Finally, she told the crowd that this baby – Jesus – is the promised Messiah.

That's the end of Anna's story – just 3 Bible verses. But what a story! Anna's purpose on earth was to verify to the people of Jerusalem that Jesus is the Messiah. Her life story is part of God's Larger story. God gave her perhaps 70 years to develop a rich, intimate relationship with Him. He molded and shaped her character in a public setting. As a prophetess, the people respected her for her age and her godliness. So "at just the right moment" she was ready to proclaim the Good News that the Messiah had finally arrived.

In Angola I attended several town meetings called "onjongus." When a village faces a decision they meet to discuss it and make a decision. There's a set procedure for conducting the meeting. People speak in order of age - oldest to youngest. No discussion occurs until the youngest person has finished speaking. Although

everyone is heard, the opinions of the elderly are given greater consideration. It's a system that has worked well for hundreds, even thousands, of years.

Contrast their system with our own. The United States is a youth-oriented society. As a nation we are obsessed with youth. In our quest to look younger we purchase facelifts, wrinkle removers, and toupees. We start coloring our hair at the first sign of gray. Some older adults buy "little red sport cars" so low to the ground that they can hardly get in or out of them.

The Bible, however, says, "Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained in the way of righteousness" (Proverbs 16:31). In Proverbs 20:29 it states, "The glory of young men is their strength, gray hair the splendor of the old." One final example from the New Testament: "In the same way, you who are younger, submit yourselves to your elders ..." (1 Peter 5:5).

Why does the church in the United States tend to overlook older saints? Why haven't we developed mentoring relationships between older mature believers and younger emerging leaders? It likely can be traced back to our culture. Christians are meant to be salmon swimming upstream against the world. Unfortunately, we sometimes allow cultural beliefs to creep into the church.

Perhaps it's time to rethink "the way we do church." Maybe it's time for our churches to tap into the knowledge, experience, and wisdom of older saints. What do you think?