

The Spirit of Christmas
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Introduction

We're finishing up the Advent season. As we look to the new year, maybe we can look back over the holidays. Sometimes when you look back, you consider the things that went well, and the things that didn't go well. Let's not worry about the things that didn't go well. We can think about those some other time (if ever).

The holiday season is full of all kinds of traditions. They vary from culture to culture and from family to family. Here's one that's fun: Some families have a tradition of making Christmas Cookies.

Cookies are great. They're one of the simple pleasures of life. You know what makes cookies great? You don't have to understand them to enjoy them.



Imagine the first time that a little child is handed a cookie. The child has no idea what goes into it. It just tastes good - really good. So we get a big smile out of the child. Then comes the day that children are invited to sit in on making cookies. They learn about flour and sugar and other ingredients. They learn about the oven. So, now they understand cookies a little more. Maybe you can appreciate those cookies even more once you've learned how they're made?

Then children learn that cookies can be a little more complex than dough and sugar. You learn how to add a few special things - Like those peanut butter cookies with the Hershey's kiss on top. Hmnnn...



Then, you get older, and you learn how to use the cookie cutter to make special shapes. Stars and Christmas trees, and little people and animals. Then you learn about decorating. With a few brushes of food color, you get gingerbread men and trees with Christmas balls.

Some may grow up and decide to become a professional. They attend a culinary institute. There, you learn about the chemistry different ingredients and how the levels of ingredients affect baking. Once you're an expert, you can make things that are so pretty, some people would be afraid to eat them!

Whether simple or complicated, bare, or beautifully ornate cookies are great. They're great if you have no idea how they're made. They've even better once you learn what's inside.

I think Christmas is like that. You can be a small child looking at a simple manger scene and know what Christmas is. You can feel joy singing songs about Christmas. You can do those things and feel the Peace, Hope, Joy, and Love of Christmas. But you know something? If you dig a little deeper, you find that the message of Christmas has some complexity to it. And if you learn it, you can enjoy Christmas all the more.

Let's do that today. Let's look a little more intently some of the Christmas story. We'll pick one part and look deeply - A part that's often neglected. If you understand it, you can more fully understand the God who gave us Christmas.

You often hear about the "spirit of Christmas". When we hear that, we think of happy feelings. We think of families and decorations. But there's a Spirit involved in the Christmas story who is far more important than any good feeling we have. That's the Holy Spirit of God. Today, we're going to look at the way the Holy Spirit was involved in the Christmas story. And we'll learn why it's important for us.

Let's begin.

I. The Spirit was involved in the birth of Jesus.

The first thing we see is that the Spirit was involved in the birth of Jesus.

18 This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit. 19 Because Joseph her husband was faithful to the law, and yet[e] did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. 20 But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23 "The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel" (which means "God with us"). (Matthew 1:18-23)

We just read that Mary did not conceive her first child in the normal way. Joseph, her husband was not involved. Instead, we're told that the child was conceived through the Holy Spirit.

We believe the Bible teaches that God is complex - He is Trinity: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. All members of the Trinity are all fully God. They are all equal. And yet, they have different roles. The Father directs. The Son and the Holy Spirit submit to the Father. Here's how Jesus described that:

Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.
(John 5:19)

One of the things the Son does as he obeys the Father is creating things. We learn this at the beginning of the Gospel according to John:

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. 2 He was with God in the beginning. 3 Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (John 1:1-3)

So, God the Father directs that something comes into being. God the Son creates it. What does the Spirit do? Here's what Jesus says: "The Spirit gives life. (John 6:63)" The Spirit is the life-giver, the energizer. We saw him doing that at the creation of the world:

1 In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. 2 Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. (Genesis 1:1-2)

Right from the start, God the Father directs. The Son, the Word of God, creates. And the Spirit is there close by, ready to give life and energy.

Later, it comes time to make humans:

7 Then the Lord God formed a man from the dust of the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living being. (Genesis 2:7)

The words that are used for "Breath" and "Spirit" in the Bible are closely related. Here's why: If you're breathing, that means you're alive. If you have breath, you have life. If you have breath, your spirit lives in your body. So, "Spirit" and "breath" and life are related.

The Spirit was there at the Creation to give life to Adam. It makes sense that the Holy Spirit of God was called in when God the Son needed a human body.

Let's be reminded of how Luke tells the story. The Angel Gabriel has just appeared to Mary. He's told her she will have a baby. Mary doesn't understand how this will happen without a man.

34 "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" 35 The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God."
(Luke 1:34-35)

So, the Spirit will "come", and the "Power of the Most high" will "overshadow" Mary. With the Holy Spirit there's life and energy and power.

We can see that the Holy Spirit was powerfully involved in the birth of Jesus. What else did the Holy Spirit do in the Christmas story?

II. The holy Spirit moved the prophets who predicted Jesus.

Next we learn that the Holy Spirit moved the prophets who predicted the coming of Jesus, the Messiah. Let's be reminded what we read from Matthew earlier:

22 All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: 23
"The virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"
(which means "God with us"). (Matthew 1:22-23)

When we discuss the topic of "Hope" during Advent season, we also go into the fact that prophets predicted the coming of the Messiah centuries before the event happened. How were they able to do this? Peter gives us the answer:

20 Above all, you must understand that no prophecy of Scripture came about by the prophet's own interpretation of things. 21 For prophecy never had its origin in the human will, but prophets, though human, spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit. (II Peter 1:20-21)

So, when the prophets of the Old Testament predicted the coming of Jesus, they were doing so because the Holy Spirit helped them. We're told that no prophecy of Scripture came about because a prophet was making it up. None of the prophets stood around and said, "Hmmm... - what is God doing today?" No! We're told they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.



The picture here is of a sailing ship in the ocean. When the wind blows, the ship can put up its sails and catch the wind. The wind gives power to the ship so it can move along. No wind – no power. No wind – no movement. The Holy Spirit is like that wind. Also, the ship needs to cooperate with the wind. The ship needs to raise its sails. No Sails, no power. No Sails, no movement. This is what the ancient prophets did. They allowed God’s Holy Spirit to carry them along.

In fact, this is true of the entire Bible.

16 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, 17 so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work. (II Timothy 3:16-17)

Once again, we see the relationship of breath and spirit. Some translations say “inspired” instead of “God-Breathed”, but the words “God-breathed” are actually the literal translation of the original text. We see here that the writers of both the Old and New Testaments of the Bible were receiving words that were breathed out by God.

We’ve just learned two things about the Holy Spirit and the Christmas story: First, the Holy Spirit was involved in the birth of Jesus. Second, the Holy Spirit was part of the prophecies that led Bible writers to predict the coming of the Messiah. Let’s ask: What does this mean for us?

III. What Does This Mean for Us?

We can find the answer when we understand why Jesus had to be born of a virgin. All humans have a terrible problem - Sin. Sin is not just a problem of behavior. It certainly involves behavior, but sin goes deeper than that. Sin is a problem of status. We enter that status from the day we’re born. In fact, from the day we’re conceived.

5 Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
(Psalm 51:5)

How did that happen? When the first humans, Adam and Eve sinned, they caused sin to infect every human that followed. And because of sin, there is death.

12 Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all people, because all sinned— (Romans 5:12)

So we see that sin entered the world through the first man, Adam. All humans are tainted by sin. That's why Jesus had to start with something different. He needed to be born in a special way. He needed a special supernatural start so he could have a sinless body. The Holy Spirit created this new life in Mary's womb.

Because of this, Jesus can offer us something new:

21 For since death came through a man, the resurrection of the dead comes also through a man. 22 For as in Adam all die, so in Christ all will be made alive. (1 Corinthians 15:21-22)

In order for this to work for you, something has to happen. Somehow, you must stop being in Adam and instead, be in Christ. To do this, you and I must be born anew. We must be born again. How does that work? Here's how Jesus described it to a great leader of the Jewish people.

3 Now there was a Pharisee, a man named Nicodemus who was a member of the Jewish ruling council. 2 He came to Jesus at night and said, "Rabbi, we know that you are a teacher who has come from God. For no one could perform the signs you are doing if God were not with him." 3 Jesus replied, "Very truly I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God unless they are born again." (John 3:1-3)

So, here's this man Nicodemus. He was a very respected teacher in Israel. He's spent years studying. He's approved. He's authorized. Because of all this, he thinks of himself as a good man. In his mind, he has arrived. He comes to have a friendly chat with Jesus. Maybe he thinks they'll discuss history? Maybe he thinks they'll discuss fine points of theology? Maybe he thinks he'll find a way to fine-tune his spiritual life?

Jesus cuts him off before the conversation can even get started. Jesus says, "forget about fine-tuning your spiritual life". He says, "You must start from scratch - You must be born again."

Nicodemus is very confused by all this. So, Jesus explains. It's during this explanation that Jesus utters what are probably the most well-known words in the Bible: "...whoever believes in him (Jesus) shall not perish but have eternal life. John 3:16"

So, to answer our question: What does all this mean to us? It means we all need to realize that Christmas is not just about the birth of a child in Bethlehem. It's about us needing to be born anew. We all need to be born again. We said that the Holy Spirit played two major roles in the Christmas story. He helped in the virgin birth of Jesus. If we believe, the power that allowed Jesus to be born in a supernatural way will help us to be reborn with new life.

We said that the Holy Spirit caused the prophets to give us the words of God. We need to ask him now to help us to understand those words. Here's what Jesus said about that: "... when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all the truth. (John 16:13)"

And the Spirit does more than guide. He comes to help us through our whole life. When Jesus was baptized, we read this:

16 As soon as Jesus was baptized, he went up out of the water. At that moment heaven was opened, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove and alighting on him. (Matthew 3:16)

When Jesus began his public ministry, the Holy Spirit was right there to help. In the same way the Holy Spirit was hovering over the waters at creation, he there for Jesus. When we accept Jesus as our Lord, the Holy Spirit is there to help us, too.

How can you be born again? You must first believe that you have a problem of sin. You must then believe that the Christ Child, Jesus, grew up to be a man. He died on a cross for your sins.

8 But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

If you believe that, the Holy Spirit will give you new life. The apostle Paul said it clearly:

20 I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. (Galatians 2:20)

Let's pull this all together.

Conclusion

We've taken some time today to understand a part of the Christmas story that we don't normally hear. I hope that by studying together, we've learned things that will help us to enjoy Christmas better in the future.

Let me share an example of how this worked for me. I met Jesus while I was in college. It's funny – before that, there was a Christmas carol that I loved to sing. "Hark the Herald Angels Sing". When I it, it went something like this:

Hark the herald angels sing.
Glory to the newborn king.
La la la, la la la la.
La la la, la la la.
Etc.

In other words, it was a great tune, but I never really stopped to listen to the words.

Then, I met Jesus. I confessed my sin and asked him to be my Savior and Lord. Now, I understand the words of the song.

Hark the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King
Peace on earth and mercy mild
God and sinners reconciled
Joyful all ye nations rise
Join the triumph of the skies
With th'angelic hosts proclaim
Christ is born in Bethlehem
Hark the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King

Christ by highest heav'n adored
Christ the everlasting Lord
Late in time behold Him come
Offspring of the Virgin's womb
Veiled in flesh the Godhead see
Hail th'incarnate Deity
Pleased as man with men to dwell
Jesus our Emmanuel
Hark the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King

Hail the heav'n-born Prince of Peace
Hail the Sun of Righteousness
Light and life to all He brings
Ris'n with healing in His wings
Mild He lays His glory by
Born that man no more may die
Born to raise the sons of earth
Born to give them second birth
Hark the herald angels sing
Glory to the newborn King

("Hark, The Herald Angels Sing"
Lyrics by Charles Wesley)

As we close the Advent season, I hope you will find new life in Christ through the Holy Spirit. I hope the words of every song will come to life for you. I hope you will allow the Holy Spirit to open the words of the Bible for you - Not just for the Christmas story, but all the wisdom that great book contains.

May you be blessed with the spirit of Christmas all year 'round.