

The Character of Christmas

For some reason we love telling and listening to stories at Christmas. Stories matter to us all year long, but at Christmas they are especially treasured.

Perhaps we love stories because they spark our imaginations, and at Christmas we allow our imaginations to run wild.

Perhaps we love stories because they take us to far off lands and usher us into worlds we might not ordinarily, or perhaps ever possibly care to enter.

Perhaps stories present to us characters and themes we find humorous or intrepid or wicked or impossibly brilliant...and so we're drawn to them.

As I said, it seems at Christmas time we love stories the most. *"We'll tell scary ghost stories and tales of the glories of Christmases long, long ago..."* says one famous Christmas song.

Central, it seems, to all great stories are great characters. Captain Ahab, Wendy Darling, Long John Silver, Bilbo Baggins, Peter Rabbit, Sherlock Holmes, Bella Swan.

We find in these characters both alien and familiar virtues. Some seem strange, distant, and even dangerous. Still others seem so familiar we might almost catch a glimpse of them from time to time in our bathroom mirror.

Christmas stories are full of great characters.

Frosty the tragically mortal snowman doomed to an icy-continuum of reincarnation each December snowfall.

Rudolf the horribly deformed reindeer, who's previously hideous abnormality saves Christmas for everyone.

The Nutcracker's mouse king, fending off animated toy soldiers to Tchaikovsky's brilliant musical backdrop.

Dr. Sues' nasty, green-hermit, the Grinch, who not only detests Christmas, but is bent on its ruin for the neighboring community.

Buddy the Elf (what's your favorite color?).

Saint Nicholas who did, though we can't be sure exactly what, something meaningful and powerful to ignite a fire of Christmas moral that many of us warm ourselves by every December.

One of my favorite Christmas characters is one who plays second fiddle to Santa Clause alone in my eyes, Ebenezer Scrooge.

Charles Dickens' description of our favorite Christmas villain is wonderfully vivid:

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind- stone, Scrooge! a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous, old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice.... He carried his own low temperature always about with him..

External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, no wintry weather chill him. No wind that blew was bitterer than he, no falling snow was more intent upon its purpose, no pelting rain less open to entreaty. Foul weather didn't know where to have him.

Many love A Christmas Carol and the many forms it has taken over the years. I love it because I love Dickens' intent in the story. Disturbed by the heartless ill will towards the poor in his city, he chose to write a disturbing story...but thankfully a redemptive one.

Scrooge is an exaggeration, a caricature of all the disinterest inside of us toward the good in the world. No one's quite as horrible as Scrooge, but we all know people who lack charity or cheer towards their fellow man, and may notice such behavior in ourselves more often than we'd like.

And so Scrooge, as repulsive as he is, becomes a vehicle for us each year to explore again the dark corners of our hearts, and allow the surrounding cast of spirits and mortals to aid in warming us up again to the ideas of goodwill, hope, life, kindness, and the true meaning of Christmas.

All of these stories and all of these characters emanate from one story, however. One that we choose to celebrate this time of year in particular.

Pagan rituals were redeemed; December was chosen for multiple reasons ranging from the political to Scriptural. Traditions have been handed down from generation to generation and we choose each year to remember and celebrate the story of the birth of Jesus, and most of us go all out.

When I was little every December 24 my parents would tuck me in after the many Christmas Eve festivities. But before I drifted off to sleep we'd read two stories.

First, the original Christmas story, surrounding the birth of Jesus as told in the Bible. We'd then move on to reading "*Twas a Night Before Christmas*"... otherwise known to child-hood Luke as "*the good one*".

I was usually eager for Christmas morning and despite my parent's best intentions... at that point on Christmas Eve most of my attention was on the arrival of the fat man in a red suit and the gifts he brought.

Naturally I'd be more interested in pondering sleighs and reindeer over mangers and exhaustive genealogies.

As a child I was willing to accept both stories. One was myth, and one was truth. But growing older I shed interest in one and became more enamored with the other, obviously...though I still love to celebrate any story or character who promotes generosity and goodwill.

Though as an adult though I am clear on the fact that some Christmas characters are robed in lore, and others are historically sound, I must admit that my consideration of the characters we find in the original Christmas story may be lacking most years.

I admit I sometimes give them little attention beyond a place on the mantelpiece.

I'm not confused about Christmas, but when shepherds and Grinches grow up together in one's mind, one might struggle to view the historical persons accurately, or take them seriously.

As we noted previously, there are many Christmas characters we may find ourselves easily relating with. They're designed that way. It's how we teach children moral lessons and how we remember important details about the roots of Christmas.

But lost in the shuffle, I fear, are many of the characters we find in the original Christmas story. Lacking illumination beyond mini-lights, the truth about them is often hidden in ancient darkness.

Perhaps, in part, it's because these characters may not seem as accessible or relatable as those we've fabricated.

They're middle-eastern. They're primitive. They're legendary. They're famous. They're players on a stage we weren't destined to grace. How could we possibly understand them, let alone associate with them?

They're distant, often not as vividly illustrated as many mythical Christmas characters, and on top of that, they're sacred, aren't they? Are we?

Tonight we invite you to allow yourself to relate to some of the original Christmas characters. These were real people. Real, ordinary people with families, and jobs, and stress. They loved, they hurt, they weren't lacking faults. At times they were afraid, at times they were valiant.

They were much like you and me in many ways. In fact, the funny thing is, they're actually the most relatable characters in all of Christmas story land because they're real.

If you look closely, you might see one or two of them in the mirror now and then.

And so we'll begin with an old, washed up, dried up priest, on his last legs. All ready to wind life down.

Zacharias

Elderly father to John the Baptizer, the first prophet to his people in a long time. Zacharias had less faith in God than Mary did, and for a lesser miracle! He learned his silent lesson, and named his son what God had instructed him to in humble obedience.

You might think you'd believe God or in God if he sent an angel to talk to you. Zacharias didn't, and we'd probably find an excuse to mistrust God, too.

God's taking an interest in me? I'm past it! I'm washed up! What good am I? What could God use me for? And how?! A lack of faith, or perspective, perhaps. He learns his lesson. The lesson being...

You're never too old (or too young, we find out later) to be useful to God. Never. You're never washed up.

Elizabeth - his wife

Liz the happy! The one who never thought she'd have that baby or lose that shame. An old woman who knew how privileged she was to be part of the great story.

Elizabeth the thankful one. The one who had been given so much, who had been given hope at the very last moment...and who responded with gladness and joy.

God had come through for Elizabeth! It wasn't over for her! She looked finished. An old woman with no children. Barron. Shamed by her culture. Yet God sewed her story into his story bringing her joy in more ways than she could have asked for.

God did more for Elizabeth than she could have imagined...and in her very last chapter...when she'd likely given up hope years ago.

Mary

A teenager. What would Mary be like if she lived today? Would she go to high-school? Listen to loud music from glossy boy bands with overly gelled hair? Text during class? Help out with chores around the house?

Mary was young and poor. Likely younger and poorer than many of us picture her. Insignificant in the great big world, and well aware of it. Plucked, it would seem, from obscurity, to play a key role in the biggest story ever.

Faced with a big problem, pregnant and unmarried...a serious cultural shame and crime in her day. Most likely misunderstood by her community. But stood by, by at least one man who chose to risk his good name.

Mary the obedient. Faced with a task from God, she knew the immediate consequences and implications of her obedience.

Mary the brave, the valiant, the strong. Mary the chosen, the upheld, the favored one. Mary, the character faced with a choice to say yes to God and see beyond the here and now to what He was going to do for her people through her. Mary the selfless.

How much would that giant task have weighed on Mary? Was she ever afraid, nervous, doubtful? Mary was thrust into the limelight. It would seem she had been selected for a role she didn't audition for. Yet she was the girl for the job. Asked to play the lead when no one would understand what she'd truly been called to act out.

Might she have ever felt alone? How often would she recall the promise she heard, and the title she had bestowed on her, "highly favored"? Is this what God's favor looks like? Mary was invited into the big picture...and she responded with a *yes*.

Not too young, too poor, too obscure to be useful to God. In her time, a mere child, and woman (with little rights, or clout, a non-person)...Mary became unexpectedly important.

Joseph

He is simply described in the Gospel as "A good man". Unwilling to cause further shame or punishment for his future bride. He had every right to tear that family and girl apart, but didn't. Eventually, a man of faith and trust, and of equal obedience to Mary.

Joseph knew what he was getting into. We're often amazed at Mary, but as every good father in the room knows, kids don't just change a mother's life, they change a father's, too.

Joseph was making a massive life decision in choosing to marry Mary. He spent his early years of fatherhood on the run, a refugee...sacrificing comfort and safety for his bride and her baby....a child who was not his.

Joseph, when faced with a call to man-hood and sacrifice, to righteousness and trust, responded. He didn't run, he didn't hide, he didn't pass the buck. Joseph did the right thing, and with God's aid played another key role.

The Angels

Hard to relate to? Choirmasters, perhaps. We could learn a lot from angels. They've seen the glory of God. They reflect it. They remind us of the *great joy* we might have and refuse to hold back their singing and praise. Live Karaoke-creatures: performing one function, designed to sing along with.

The Shepherds

In a word: Outsiders. Culturally and religiously excluded from every day society. Mistrusted and hailing from the wrong side of the tracks. No one thought much of shepherds.

No one would think to invite them to celebrate the birth of a king...and those similar to their social status these days wouldn't be invited into the maternity ward of a future ruler today. Not much has changed.

Shepherds were forbidden to even give testimony in law courts for concern about their integrity. People thought them liars and petty thieves. But they become the first apostles, the first messengers, and testifiers of God's arrival on earth.

Distrusted and excluded by everyone, except God.

Shepherds had reputation for stealing and telling stories, fibs even... but shepherds became witnesses to and were entrusted with the truest and most important message the universe had to offer.

Accepted by God, invited by God...living metaphors at the nativity. The shepherds welcomed, in a way, one of their own... the Good Shepherd. A reminder that "*outsider*" is a word lost on this newborn King.

The Magi – Wise Men

Scientists, astronomers, mystics, spiritualists, pagans, astrologers, ...Capricorns? Chosen by God to be part of the story.

God lets people in early on who conservative religious types would likely hold at arms length. But God and his plan for mankind is for...mankind.

And God will speak how he likes. Through books, or prophets, or stars...*and to whom he likes*, to junkies, or farmers, or scientists, or your uncle who doesn't trust organized religion or Steven Harper, for that matter.

These men were on a quest. Something important had happened. Someone important had happened. They couldn't quite put their finger on it.

A long journey of sacrifice, with a destination that was unknown to them when they set off...they bravely chose not to ignore what they knew to be important.

They made a trek towards God, though not fully knowing it. They risked...and in the end shielded the child they sought out, and found themselves a part of the story.

What a cast! What a varied bunch! Old priests, to grubby herders, to scientists, to angelic beings, to teenage girls. All welcomed to play a part. Makes some of our modern tales look quite tame.

But I've left a couple of characters out. The first is character we'd rather not mention...but every Christmas story needs a villain.

As I've been thinking through these characters, I found myself identifying most with a man who's madness defined him and actions horrify us today – Herod, the original Scrooge.

Herod the Great.

As removed from antiquity as we are, you get the feeling that even if he didn't name himself "*the great*", he certainly didn't mind being called it.

He ruled with an iron fist, as best he could. Built palaces, theatres, aqueducts, fortresses.

But he was also Herod the delusional. History tells us he murdered members of his own family to hold onto his throne. It seems he'd stop at nothing to control. He's credited with the infanticide of Bethlehem's sons, of which the Holy family barely escaped.

Herod the Great-ly misguided. His actions would lead us to believe he lived for power, respect and fame.

Faced with the arrival of another king, the true king, Herod did everything to hold onto his power...including killing babies.

Faced with surrender and the inevitability of a greater power and story than his, Herod, for me, is a metaphor for the inner man I wrestle with daily.

A man who wishes to be king, a person who wishes to control, and will do everything to hold onto his crown.

A delusional man at times, unaware of a bigger picture beyond his own life. A man capable of terrible things. A man faced with the arrival of Christ in his land, but a rejecter of him.

Herod's story ended tragically. He died a king of a tiny slice of the world and missed surrendering to the king of everything. He is a footnote, and a negative one at that to the great King Jesus.

I am glad my trajectory is different than Herod's. Though there may be, at times, a little Herod in my heart (and maybe he's more noticeable at Christmas)...I'm glad that my story and your story can be a redemptive one.

One last character...the central one, of course. A baby, in a manger.

The Christ Child

Though predicted by prophets and kings hundreds of years before his birth, a baby couldn't have been a more unexpected character at the centre of the story.

That God, would humble himself and become a child, is the great wonder and mystique of Christmas. It was unfathomable to the people at the time that he lived, and it's still hard to swallow today. God's bigger than a baby, what's he doing here?

This character development shakes up our paradigms, and turns our worlds upside down.

However, no matter from wherever each of us approach the manger, we are forced to re-orient ourselves each year around the central character...because God's love, and demonstration of goodness through Jesus throws us, all of us, for an absolute loop.

Through the arrival of The Baby:

- The old are informed they've got life in them yet, and are useful in the plans of their Creator. Not quite ready to be put out to pasture.
- The young are told they matter, and though seem to hold no power, are invited to join in, and given great responsibility. This is an inspiring sub-plot, especially in a society where less and less is being expected from young people. God doesn't see it that way. He expects and endows more.
- The outsider becomes an insider. The excluded become included... and we're all reminded that God loves prejudice, or favoritism.
- The genuinely concerned people about their meaning, existence and purpose in life are given hope that there is some order, some meaning, some purpose to everything. There is some light, some reason...by a light, a hint, the guiding of a star.

Upon considering these characters and upon our conclusion, I want to leave you with a question:

How are you oriented to the Child this Christmas? How will you respond to him in light of his invitation to you to be a part of the story. To play a role.

At the centre of every great story are great characters. Let us find ourselves in the story, and not miss out on the chance to advance the plot of God in our lives this Christmas.

A prayer for us:

Come, my Light, and illuminate my darkness.

Come, my Life, and revive me from death.

Come, my Physician, and heal my wounds.

Come, Flame of divine love, and burn up the thorns of my sins, kindling my heart with the flame of your love.

Come, my King, sit upon the throne of my heart and reign there.

For you alone are my King, and my Lord.

Amen.

-St. Dimitrii (17th century)

Discussion Questions

- What character in the Christmas story do you find most interesting?
- What character do you most relate to in the original Christmas story? Why?
-