

Christ for the world: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

by [Ruth A. Meyers](#) in the [December 5, 2001](#) issue

When I think of the Christmas story, I see the crèche that was displayed each year in the front hall of my family home. The manger scene began to take shape during the last week of Advent, when we cut fragrant pine branches and spread them on the hall table, then placed figurines of oxen and cows in the center. Mary and Joseph took their places amid the creatures. Off to the side, shepherds began to gather with their sheep, including my favorite shepherd, who carried a lamb on his shoulders. On Christmas Eve, the baby Jesus appeared in his bed of straw, the shepherds moved closer to pay homage and an angel arrived to watch over the scene. As we journeyed to Epiphany, the magi and their camels arrived and joined the scene.

Those of us expecting this familiar Christmas story are surprised when we hear Matthew begin abruptly with, “Now the birth of Jesus took place in this way.” Where is the introduction to the homeless couple seeking shelter as the woman prepares to give birth? Where is the description of the stable, crude and bare, with cattle lowing and the baby Jesus lying on a bed of hay? Where are the shepherds in the field, the angels announcing the good news and singing God’s praises?

If we read further in Matthew, we find the familiar story of the wise men, following the star and carrying gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. But the story of Jesus’ birth is told from a very different perspective. Luke focuses on Mary—her encounter with the angel, her birthing and wrapping of Jesus in bands of cloth, her reflections on the events. But Matthew’s story centers on Joseph.

Like another Joseph who was a dreamer, Mary’s Joseph had a life-changing dream too. Instead of quietly ending his engagement to Mary when he learned of her unplanned and untimely pregnancy, Joseph went ahead with their marriage, and agreed to become the adopted father of her child. When the child was born, Joseph, still obeying his dream, named him Jesus, or “Savior.”

Perhaps Matthew and Luke are not so different. Each tells the story of an unplanned pregnancy and of the fear and dismay that initially accompanies the announcement

of that pregnancy. Each tells the story of an encounter with an angel who offers encouragement by foretelling the mission of the child who will be born. Each tells the story of a parent accepting this astounding news in humble obedience to God.

The promise of a savior is astonishing news for the people who were desperate for a savior. In Isaiah, when King Ahaz was beset by foreign powers, he looked for an alliance with one of the foreign kings. But Isaiah counseled trust not in foreign governments but in God. Isaiah promised the birth of a child named Immanuel, "God with us." In Matthew's story, the child Immanuel is Jesus, God with us, the one who will save people from their sins.

Hope for a savior echoes in the psalm appointed for today: "Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved." In our times of trial, the cry of the psalmist rings in our hearts.

In our country, our sense of safety and security has been shattered. Rowan Williams, Anglican archbishop of Wales, was a few blocks from the World Trade Center on September 11. As he recalls: "I remember feeling, 'Now I know just a little of what it is like for so many human beings, Israelis and Palestinians now, and Iraqis a few years ago.'" God shares the experience of terror and death and answers not in the language of hatred and rejection, but in giving us the Word made flesh, God with us.

Part of the astonishing surprise of the announcement of the Savior is how inclusive it is. On the one hand, Jesus is a Hebrew descended from Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, a man of royal lineage descended from the renowned King David. On the other hand, the salvation incarnate in Jesus extends beyond the people of Israel to include the gentiles. This is implicit in the genealogy that introduces the narrative of Jesus' birth in Matthew's Gospel. The genealogy names not only Abraham and David but also Rahab and Ruth, gentiles who married into the Hebrew lineage. Paul highlights the inclusion of the gentiles in his Letter to the Romans, telling them that he was sent to the gentiles, including those in Rome.

For us, the distinction between Jew and gentile does not have the significance it had in the first-century world of scripture. But what about contemporary distinctions created by national borders or racial and ethnic identity? What of the distinction between Christian and Muslim? To whom is God's salvation extended?

The narrative of Jesus' birth does not provide a ready answer to such questions. At the conclusion of Matthew's Gospel, the risen Jesus sends the disciples out to all

nations, directing them to carry the message they have received from him. Perhaps in the story of Jesus' unconventional birth (born of Mary yet conceived by the Holy Spirit), we get our first inkling of miracle—that in Jesus God comes to *all* of us. Perhaps, as we hear again the story of Jesus' unconventional birth, we may be open to God's salvation appearing in new and surprising places.