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Christmas Eve, 2011

Christmas Story

A young woman named Mary was planning her wedding and imagining her future.

Suddenly an angel appeared and told her not to be afraid. He told her that she would have a baby---God's own son. Even though it was hard for her to understand, she trusted God and said yes!

She trusted God and gave up her own plans for the future and gave them all to God.

She trusted God and celebrated this huge change in her life. When she allowed God to change her life, that choice would mean that God would change the whole world.

One person can make a decision that results in a huge difference!

A carpenter named Joseph was planning his wedding and dreaming of his life together with Mary. Then Mary told him she was going to have a baby, and he was not the father.

His heart broken, he decided to divorce her quietly. He could have had her stoned. It was the law, but he wanted to end their relationship, not her life!

And then an angel appeared to him and told him not to be afraid, that Mary's baby was God's own son. And even though it was hard for him to understand, Joseph trusted God and said yes.

Joseph trusted God enough to marry a woman who was already pregnant. He trusted God enough to put aside his own plans for the future and let God be in charge of his life.

He trusted God enough to take care of Mary and the baby, even though he didn't know what the future was going to be.

He trusted God enough to continue loving Mary and to care for her and the child, to bring the boy up as his own.

Mary and Joseph trusted God enough that when the angel said "Don't be afraid," they weren't. Or at least they could make the choice they would have made if they weren't afraid.

And because of the choices they made, the world has been changed forever.

God's son, Jesus Christ, was born into the world----God became human and walked the earth among people, and people knew then that God loves them.

They saw Emmanuel---God-with-us---and when they saw him,
they knew they didn't need to be afraid.

Love overcomes fear.

And down through the years, any time anyone knows that God is
with them, they are not afraid. And wonderful things happen.

Do you know that God is with you? What will you do when you
know that, and you are no longer afraid?

Mary and Joseph travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

The Roman government had ordered a census and everyone had to go to the place where their family was from and register with the government. Probably this was for taxation purposes, or maybe just to have a record of how many people were under Roman rule at the time.

Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, because their ancestor was the great king David. Bethlehem was called the City of David, so that's where they went.

It was a long journey, and Mary was very pregnant. Joseph had her ride on a donkey, because she couldn't possibly have walked that far.

They got to Bethlehem late. Every bed in the town was already taken. Or maybe there was a bed, but Mary wouldn't have had any privacy in it, and she needed privacy when she had her baby.

They found shelter in the stable, and she had her baby and wrapped him up snug and warm in swaddling cloth---strips of cloth wound around him to keep him warm and comfortable. We still wrap our babies up like little burritos today!

Then they laid him in the manger, the place where the food for the animals was put.

God had taken care of Mary, Joseph, and the baby. The baby wasn't born out on the road somewhere without any shelter. The birth went smoothly, and there was straw for Mary to rest on.

After Jesus was born, the angel appeared to some shepherds on the nearby hillside. Just like the angel told Mary and Joseph not to be afraid, the angel told the shepherds not to be afraid.

The angel told them that the Messiah had been born, and then a whole choir of angels appeared and sang, "Glory in the highest! And on earth, peace, good will to all people!"

The shepherds rejoiced that God had come to live on earth, and they went to see the baby.

Shepherds were not holy people. They couldn't leave their sheep alone and go to synagogue. They couldn't keep all of the religious laws. After all, sheep still need watching on the Sabbath!

So why did God choose them to be the first to know? Why didn't the angel go to the scribes and the Pharisees and the priests instead?

Because Jesus came for the poor in Spirit, the humble of heart, those who had no relationship with God. Jesus came for the powerless, not the powerful.

Jesus came for those who had lost sight of God's love, to reveal it to them in human form.

And this is good news for us! God loves us, each one of us, no matter who we are and what we do. There are no qualifications, no prerequisites, and no conditions.

And the shepherds came and worshipped him, even though they were poor and dirty.

A bright star had appeared in the east. It wasn't an angel and it didn't tell anyone not to be afraid, but wise men saw it and believed that it announced the birth of a new king.

So they got on their camels and loaded up their gold, frankincense and myrrh and followed the star. Gold was appropriate for a king, symbolizing the richness of the kingdom, and Christ is the king.

Frankincense was a resin that was burned during worship. People burned it as they prayed, believing it carried their prayers to heaven. The wise men brought it to represent Christ who is our priest, who carries our prayers to heaven.

Myrrh was a bitter substance used to heal wounds and bruises, and Jesus would be wounded and bruised by this world. It was also used in Egypt for embalming mummies, and Christ would one day be anointed for burial.

So wise men, the magi, came with symbolic gifts, not practical gifts. And they came following a star.

The significance of the wise men is more than these symbolic gifts. They came from the east, probably from Persia, which is now Iran. The fact that they understood the importance of this new king and came to worship him means that Christ did not come only for the Jews, but for the whole world, for people of all nations!

The birth of Jesus changed the world, not just Israel!

And people who are wise still seek him, still trust him, still say yes to God, overcoming their fear and abandoning their own plans for the future.

We, too, have a choice. We can listen to the message that God sends to us through angels, through stars, through still small voices.

We can trust God to have better plans for us than we have for ourselves and stop being afraid.

We can come and worship Christ, the King, as he is born into our lives over and over and over again.

We can let Christ be our Lord in every way, in every part of our lives.

Christ the Savior is born. He makes a difference in our lives. He changes the world!

Amen.