

BIRTH

(Luke 2:1-20)

In Luke, the beginning of Jesus' journey is the story of his birth. It is an appropriate place to begin our journey into the gospel. Luke's birth narrative is probably told more frequently than any other story. During the Christmas season, it is read in local churches and homes, performed in pageants, and recited on television. It has become a romanticized narrative, full of sentimentality. But rarely is it told in a manner that is appropriate to its original meaning and intent.

The first step in the journey is to get the story off the page or out of the air and inside yourself. The goal is to master the story so that it can be told without fear. Learning to tell a story is a natural process. We do it virtually every day in some form. We hear stories of various kinds and retell them regularly. Retelling stories we have heard from someone else is the stuff of rumors, jokes, and mealtimes. Learning to tell biblical stories is an extension of the same process.

There are many different ways of learning and remembering stories. In the end, we each develop our own distinctive processes. But identifying some basic principles can be helpful for a successful beginning. I will give some hints that have worked for others. From that start, you can build your own system.

Learning the Story

The most natural way to learn a story is by hearing it told well and then retelling it. That is the way in which stories are learned in oral cultures. But most people who learn biblical stories in literate cultures do it alone, working with a text. Thus, while I recommend that you listen to the telling of the stories whenever possible and that you find a partner and learn a story together, this first set of suggestions assumes that you will often be working by yourself.

Listening for the Structure

The first principle of learning a story is to identify the structure of the story. Once the structure is clearly in mind, the words can be hung on that mental frame.

A biblical story is a series of sounds. The beginnings and endings of the sounds are marked by breaths. A sentence is usually the sounds that can be spoken in one breath. The sentences or breath units are grouped in episodes. An episode is a story unit of two to four sentences. The sentences and episodes are the foundational components of a biblical story's structure.

In the text that follows, Luke's birth narrative is arranged in sentences and episodes. I suggest that you read the story aloud and listen for its structure. A period and a new sentence at the margin is the sign for a breath. The end of an episode is indicated by a row of stars and stands for a longer pause. In storytelling, taking time for a relaxed, deep breath between episodes is always appropriate.

This text is the Revised Standard Version translation, with only slight modifications. I have chosen this text because it is the most widely used translation tradition in contemporary English-speaking churches. However, if you prefer or are already familiar with another translation, learn that one. All translations of the Gospel stories from the original Greek are approximations of the originals. And different translations have different values. At a number

of points along the way, I will include adaptations which modify the Revised Standard Version for storytelling, as well as original translations of my own that render the repetitions and connotations of the Greek more accurately. The goal is to hear and to tell the story as fully and clearly as possible.

The Story

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be enrolled, each to his own city.

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to be delivered and she gave birth to her first-born son. And she wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them. And they were filled with fear.

And the angel said to them, "Be not afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people, for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.

And this will be a sign for you: you will find a babe wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased."

When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste, and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning this child.

And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

But Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart.
And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it
had been told them.

Having read the story aloud, you can now identify some of the characteristics of oral narratives.

Variations in tempo. In order to read in one or even two breaths the sentences about the trip from Nazareth up to Bethlehem (vss. 4-5) and the angel's first words to the shepherds (vss. 10-11), it is necessary to read rapidly. The short sentences – "And they were filled with fear," "And all went to be enrolled," "But Mary kept all these things" – can be read more slowly. This more leisurely pace gives the listener more time to think over what these words might mean.

Emphasis. The contrast in tempo between different sentences creates emphasis. For example, two of the short sentences conclude an episode (vss. 3, 9b). Since episode endings are accentuated by the longer pause between the episodes, the content of those sentences naturally receives more emphasis. The pause gives the listeners more time to reflect on these final words. This end position, combined with the slower pace of a short sentence, makes these two sentences more emphatic. In Luke's story, this concluding emphasis is given to the description of the enrollment and the shepherds' fear. This principle of "end emphasis" is present throughout the biblical storytelling tradition. In this story, it is easy to hear how it works.

Verbal threads. The episodes of the story are tied together by linked sounds. Verbal threads are words that are repeated either exactly or with minor variations. The verbal thread that ties the whole story together is "wrapped him in swaddling cloths, laid [lying] him in a manger" (vss. 7, 12, 16). The story's beginning is connected by the verbal thread "enrollment" (enrolled), which occurs in each of the first four sentences of the story (vss. 1-5). Verbal threads in the story's midsection are "the city of David" (vss. 5, 11) and "praising God" (vss. 13, 20). The conclusion is knit together by variations on the theme of the shepherds' hearing and retelling what the angel told them: ". . . made known the saying which had been told them," ". . . wondered at what the shepherds told them," ". . . as it had been told them" (vss. 17-18,20). I find it no coincidence that the confirmation of the truth of the story is connected with the hearing and telling of stories.

Naming and Picturing the Structure

The episodes are chunks of the story that are unified by a theme or an image. A step in learning the story is to identify each episode with a name. My names for these episodes are the enrollment, the birth, the shepherds, the announcement, the confirmation, and the responses. These themes or subjects also help to recall the key words of each episode.

The story is then learned episode by episode. When I am learning a new story by myself, I often create a rough chart of the key words in each episode. The most important words are the episode's beginning and ending. In between are the key words at the core of the story. My chart of the first episode might look something like this:

In those days	decree	Caesar Augustus	enrolled.
first enrollment		Quirinius, governor of Syria.	
Everyone	enrolled	each	own city.

In effect, these words become names for the chunks in which I learn the story. The key words are the story's verbal skeleton.

Equally important are the images of the story. For people who are visually oriented, images are the very stuff of memory. Luke's narrative is unusually vivid in its images: the emperor and the governor issuing their decrees, the journey up to Bethlehem and the birth in a stable, the shepherds with their flocks, the angel and the angel choir, the shepherds and the family in the stable. These images are so striking that they are hard to forget.

Episode beginnings are the first place to look for images. That is usually where you will find both settings in time and place and introductions of new characters. In this story, the scene shifts from the palace of Caesar Augustus to Bethlehem to the shepherds' fields outside the town and then back to the birthplace in Bethlehem. Identifying an image for each episode fixes the episode in the mind as a unified whole or gestalt.

Luke's word pictures have the same style as Japanese paintings. In a minimalist manner, he draws a strong line here and a vivid color there. He outlines a verbal image that the listeners can fill out in their imaginations. If a storyteller sees the image vividly, the story will be remembered more easily.

Some people have found that creating visual images of a story, in either symbols or cartoons, helps them remember it. Picture writing worked for the Egyptians and, in a different style, the Chinese. It might work for you.

Thinking the Story

Many people start trying to memorize a story by repeating the words over and over. This learning strategy is most effective when the story is rethought rather than more or less mindlessly regurgitated. One way of thinking the story is to group the words into chunks that are as large as possible. Just as "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" is one word, so also is "inthosedaysadecreewentoutfromCaesarAugustus." As the story is repeated, these chunks of words are hung on the structure of the names, key words, and images that have been identified and learned. Remembering the story is then a process of rethinking these word chunks. Once you have identified the structure of verbal and pictorial thoughts and internalized them, the words are simply present in memory as the means for thinking those thoughts.

Learning stories is best done in the dead spaces of time: before and after bedtime, riding in the car, taking a shower or working on the face in front of the mirror with a razor or makeup, waiting for an appointment. My good friend David Rhoads, with whom I usually room at scholarly meetings, is invariably reciting some story or another in the shower. By learning a little bit day by day, he has learned, among others, the Gospel of Mark, the Revelation to John, and Galatians.

Memory research has also discovered that the best pattern for repetition is short and frequent repetitions with progressively longer intervals in between. A pattern for the repetition of a short story might be: first day-four times during the day and twice more before bedtime; second day-twice in the shower and three times during an hour of the day; third day-once in the morning and two times during the day; fifth day-once in the morning or at bedtime. In order to keep the stories in the memory, they need to be repeated. Finding occasions when you can tell the stories is essential for keeping the memory fresh. That's why storytellers go around looking for people who will listen. Retelling the stories is the only way to keep them.

There is no substitute for repetition. But repetition primarily retains data in short-term memory. The key to storing a story in long-term memory is to associate the words with episodic and semantic structures of sounds, images, and gestures. By working out your own recipe of memory processes, the story will be yours to enjoy and to share with others.

Word for Word or in My Own Words?

Before reading any further, I would suggest that you learn the first two episodes of Luke's narrative. And the first question always is, should I learn the story word for word or can I learn it in my own words? Learning biblical stories raises a distinctive set of issues for storytellers because the text of the story is often so well known. It is like telling the story of the three little pigs to a four-year-old who has heard it fifty times. If you change the words of the big bad wolf, you'll quickly be told that you got it wrong.

Furthermore, the authors of the Gospels were skilled storytellers who knew what they were doing. For example, the first thing that beginning storytellers tend to do is to add lots of words. The assumption is that these were primitive authors and that we are now more sophisticated. Since every extra word slows down the story's action, the effect is to make the story longer and more boring. Biblical storytellers learned from experience how easily a listener can lose interest. For this reason, they spent words like misers. These stories were perfected by decades of retelling. Like a rolling stone, the rough edges of the story were worn off until it was smooth and shiny.

The stories of the Bible are probably the most powerful narratives in the history of world literature. We honor Shakespeare and other poets by learning their poems word for word. We perform the music of Mozart, Bach, and Beethoven with minute precision. Why not honor biblical storytellers with the respect that they deserve?

However, in most churches, the actual words that were written by the biblical authors in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek are neither read nor learned. The Hebrew text of the Bible continues to be recited and memorized in synagogues. But in Western churches, vernacular translations are read rather than the original Hebrew and Greek. Furthermore, as is evident in the variations of the same stories in the Gospels themselves, storytelling invites some degree of improvisation. The rote recitation of exactly the same words in every telling can become deadly. Therefore, a preoccupation with getting every word of an English translation exactly right is probably inappropriate. Nevertheless, as Alec McGowen has shown, the recitation of the exact words of a first-rate translation can be a powerful form of biblical storytelling.

The best approach is to treat biblical stories like a jazz pianist treats a classic tune. A jazz pianist will first learn the music in its original form. Then he can improvise on it. Many of the world's great organists improvise a postlude on the tune of the final hymn. On the other side of mastery, good improvisation is possible. Sometimes, as in some settings of public worship, it is appropriate to tell biblical stories word for word exactly as they are received. On more informal occasions or in a sermon, various degrees of improvisational retelling are wonderful.

I would suggest, therefore, that you first learn the story as close to word for word as possible. An initial goal might be 75 percent verbal accuracy. As you work with the story, you will grow into it more deeply and it will be easier to remember. Having mastered the story in its original form, you will then be able to improvise on it appropriately and with confidence.

As soon as possible after you have learned it, tell it to someone. I find that if I tell a joke within a few hours after I've heard it, I will remember it. But if I wait until the next day,

it is gone. If no one is available, tell it into a tape recorder or to a friend with whom you can talk in your imagination. When my son Michael was young he had an imaginary friend, Joe Nagry from Mr. Roger's neighborhood, to whom he told wonderful stories for many months. Good friends make good storylisteners, even if they are present only in memory or imagination.

Listening to the Story

Biblical storytelling is like an archaeological dig. We are seeking to hear an ancient story so that we can retell it appropriately. A biblical text records the story's sounds. And as you become sensitive to the patterns of the stories, you can discern the clues to the sounds. How then did Luke's story sound when it was originally told?

Background

The enrollment. The storytellers who formed the stories of Luke's Gospel lived in the aftermath of the Jewish war. The war took place between A.D. 66-70. It was begun by Jewish Zealots who believed that true faith meant giving allegiance to the God of Israel *alone*. Any signs of allegiance to emperors or kings were anathema and were considered apostasy. This included paying Roman taxes. The story of the Pharisees questioning Jesus about paying taxes to Caesar reflects this issue (Matt. 22:15-22; Mark 12:13-17; Luke 20:20-26).

The Zealots stood in the tradition of the Maccabees. In 167 B.C., Mattathias, a rural priest and the father of five sons, killed a Jew who was going to offer a sacrifice at an altar to Zeus (I Macc. 2). These altars and mandatory sacrifices were part of a campaign by Antiochus Epiphanes, the Syrian king, to abolish the Jewish law and establish Hellenistic religion and culture in Israel. Jews who cooperated with the Syrians were considered traitors by zealous Jews like Mattathias.

This tradition of Jewish rebellion against Hellenistic rulers was a response to centuries of political oppression. With the exception of the brief period of Jewish independence from 142-63 B.C., which resulted from the Maccabean revolt, the people of Israel were ruled by various Gentile emperors from 587 B.C. on: Babylonians (587-539 B.C.), Persians (539-332 B.C.), Hellenists (332-142 B.C.), and Romans (since 63 B.C.).

This history is the background for Luke's story. Luke sets Jesus' birth in the context of the enrollment ordered by Caesar Augustus at the time of Quirinius. As far as we know from ancient historical sources, the only such enrollment in Palestine took place in A.D. 6 (Reicke 1968, 135-36). Its purpose was tax collection. The first Zealot revolt took place at this time. Under the leadership of Judas the Galilean and Zadok, a Pharisee, an attempt was made to sabotage the enrollment. The extent of the revolt is unclear and may often be overestimated (Rhoads, 1976, 47-52). Despite the resistance, whatever its extent, Quirinius succeeded in carrying out the enrollment. The enrollment was probably remembered in the period of the Lukan storytellers as a time of conflict over Roman rule. It was only the latest in a long series of oppressive actions by Gentile emperors. The enrollment under Quirinius was told and heard, therefore, in the context of this history.

The first chapter of Luke's Gospel describes the miraculous conception and birth of John the Baptist and Mary's conversations with the angel Gabriel and her kinswoman Elizabeth. These are the immediate contexts for the birth narrative in Luke 2. I would suggest

that you read them aloud along with a good commentary (e.g., Raymond Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah*).

Details of the Story

David. Luke associates Jesus' birth with David, during whose reign Israel experienced its greatest power. The long sentence describing the trip up to Bethlehem includes verbal threads which recall the memories of David: "to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David" (vs. 4). It is extremely rare in biblical narrative for a name to be repeated twice in the same sentence. But Luke repeats David's name twice so that Jesus' relationship to him cannot be missed.

Mary. Because an intense identification with Mary has been evoked in the earlier stories of her encounters with Gabriel and Elizabeth, this brief description—"Mary, his betrothed, who was with child"—calls back all of those associations (vs. 4). Having heard the stories of Gabriel's visit to Mary and of her ecstatic conversation with Elizabeth (Luke 1:39-56), Luke's listeners knew it was probable that Mary would become pregnant. But these words both confirm the prophecy and set it in a new context. The story invites the listener who has identified with Mary to think back over this long trip up to Joseph's hometown from her point of view. The tone of the words is tender.

"Gave birth to her first-born son." The punctuation of the sentence determines whether this phrase is part of the second or third sentence in the episode (vs. 7). It seems to me that the birth is the climax of the second part of the episode. The sentence describes the inconvenient and embarrassing context of the birth and ends with the birth itself. The final sentence is then more intimate and focuses on Mary's care for her newborn son in difficult circumstances.

The shepherds' fear. The phrase describing the shepherds' fear is highly emphatic; literally translated, it says, "And the shepherds feared a great fear" (vs. 9). Luke was seeking to evoke ultimate fear.

The translation of the last phrase of the angels' song is problematic (vs. 14). "Men" here is used as a generic term but is often heard now as sex-specific. Furthermore, most grammarians conclude that *eudokias* refers to humanity as the object rather than the subject of God's good pleasure. Thus, rather than "with whom he is pleased," a better translation is "on whom his pleasure rests." Therefore, the most accurate translation now would be "to all people on whom God's pleasure rests."

The final episode reports the responses of, first, the people who heard about the sign, then Mary, and, finally, the shepherds (vss. 18-20). Each of these descriptions is an insight into their internal perceptions and responses. These inside views increase the sympathetic characteristics of these characters at the climax of the story.

Comments on the Individual Episodes

The enrollment. The major question in telling this episode is the storyteller's attitude toward the enrollment. My conclusion is that the narrator's attitude was not positive. The usual sentimental tone for reading this story, which presents Caesar Augustus and Quirinius with the same nostalgia and warmth as Santa Claus, is thoroughly inappropriate. Resignation, cynicism, or hostility are all possible attitudes for an appropriate retelling. Luke is describing political and economic oppression by an alien dictatorship. The decree's effect was to require everyone to travel to their hometowns and register for a census that enabled the Romans to

collect taxes more efficiently. The effect of the episode for Luke's listeners was to recall that time of political oppression which sowed the seeds for the Jewish war.

The journey. This long sentence (vss. 4-5) does not have to be told with the speed that is required to do it in one breath. It may instead have the kind of trudging tempo of a long journey. Such a tempo emphasizes its heaviness. It is relieved by the memories of David. Furthermore, the journey's poignancy is heightened by the implied tenderness in the relationship between Joseph and his pregnant fiancée, Mary, at the end. The phrase "while they were there" calls attention to the inconvenience and stress of Mary's being away from home at the time of this birth (vs. 6).

The ethical norms shared by Luke and his listeners also shaped the meaning of this episode. In Jewish culture, it was irregular for a couple to have a child before they were married. Furthermore, this birth took place in Joseph's ancestral hometown. Disapproval and ostracism may be implied in the failure of Joseph's family to extend hospitality to Joseph and Mary. If so, this implied disapproval of the people of Bethlehem is later transformed into their wonder at what the shepherds told them. An opposite reversal takes place in the subsequent story of Jesus' first sermon in Nazareth (Luke 4:16-30). The people are at first pleased, but their response is transformed into violent offense.

The shepherds. The rest of the story is experienced primarily from the perspective of the shepherds. The initial identification with the shepherds is established in the introductory episode (vss. 8-9) by a relatively long inside view. The narrator describes the shepherds watching their flock, the appearance of the angel, and their internal feelings of fear. The effect is to see and hear the event from the shepherds' point of view. The shepherds are relatively "low-life" characters, not unlike Falstaff and his cronies in Shakespeare's plays. A little bit of that folksiness in the telling is thoroughly appropriate.

The announcement. Angels have a problem in biblical stories. They have to get persons to calm down before they can deliver their messages. The style of this angel may be more "cool" and relaxed than the usual heavy and authoritative manner of traditional readings. Angels were, after all, mediators between humans and God. The angel in Luke has a distinctive character that needs to be caught appropriately. The angel's announcement is followed by the identification of a sign that will confirm the good news (vss. 11-12). This may be in response to the implicit disbelief of the shepherds.

The climax of the episode is the song of the angel choir, which is appropriately sung in a broad and celebrative manner (vss. 13-14). The melody is less important than the mood.

The confirmation. An image in my mind for the shepherds' response is Abbott and Costello after they have seen a ghost. It is a combination of excitement and relief. An appropriate improvisation at the beginning for me is "Hey, you guys, let's ..." (vs. 15). The narrator's report of the discovery of the family expresses the shepherds' wonder and amazement at what they were seeing, rather than being a mere description (vss. 16-17). And the description of their report needs to be told in the spirit in which they told it to Mary and Joseph.

The responses. Each of these responses has a distinctive spirit: first, the amazement of everyone who heard, then the meditative pondering of Mary, and, finally, the joy of the shepherds (vss. 18-20). Mary's quiet response is surrounded by the enthusiasm of the people and the shepherds.

Connections

One of the gifts of a storyteller is to bring the distinctiveness of her or his experience to the telling of the story. If people do this, hearing the same biblical stories retold over and over again is never boring, because the story is always different. Each person gives the story a distinctive nuance and shape. The same words can have radically different meanings when told by different people. This distinctiveness emerges naturally as the story is internalized. Throughout this book, I will make some suggestions about fields of personal and communal experience that you might explore. Connecting our experiences of life with biblical stories gives our telling of the stories depth and distinctiveness.

Personal experiences. The episode of Jesus' birth connects most directly with the memories and experiences of childbirth. Mothers, fathers, and siblings all have different contributions to make to the telling of these stories. One way of exploring these connections is to think about and retell the stories of the births you remember. In remembering and retelling those stories, especially with the others who were involved, the special quality of birth stories shines forth. It is also fun to ask parents and grandparents to tell the stories they remember about your birth.

The angel's announcement to the shepherds is also connected with another type of experience, the experience of telling someone good news. The most important associations with the spirit of this story are these experiences of delivering good news. Announcements of births, weddings, awards, victories, good health; opening letters with good news in them—these are all instances. These experiences have in common that unique delight of knowing something that will make the other person happy, and, if you see in their eyes that they don't believe it, having the evidence to prove it. You might make a list now of those times when you have had good news to tell. The full range is appropriate, from little daily victories to the big ones.

For example, I remember the moments of telling my sister that I was going to get married, calling my folks when our sons were born, and announcing to my wife that I had successfully passed my doctoral exam. Once again, I would suggest that you tell some of those stories and listen to others tell them to you. In that process, you will catch the unique spirit of the announcements of the angel and the shepherds.

When Luke's story is told, let the connections you have discovered be expressed. Generally, our tellings of biblical stories are disassociated from human experience. The vitality and enthusiasm that comes from letting these connections emerge is appropriate to the stories. But equally important is that the stories of the actions of God also shed new light and spirit on our stories.

Communal experiences. The communal context of the story of Jesus' birth is the experience of political and economic oppression. Jesus was born in a manger in Bethlehem because his parents had to register to pay taxes to a foreign dictatorship. Connecting with experiences of political and economic oppression now is, therefore, also a resource for hearing and telling this story well. What experiences of oppression have you and those with whom you are identified endured? Remembering those stories is one way of exploring the connections of the story of Jesus' birth with your experience.

I will suggest a storytelling process that you might try. Gather together representatives of a community with which you have shared such experiences: fellow students, members of the family, other women or men, other persons who share your work role, other members of your race or nation. Recall your story and some of the things that you have endured and are enduring together. And then tell the story of Jesus' birth.

Later, find and read the story of some group other than your own that has been oppressed. Suggestions would be the people of Cambodia and Vietnam, the peasants of Latin

America, the European Jewish community during the Nazi era, the Palestinians in the Middle East, the black community of South Africa or the United States, the mentally handicapped, or refugees from southeast Asia or Afghanistan. And once again, listen to Jesus' birth narrative and the ways in which it intersects with their story.

What Luke's narrative will mean I cannot predict or foretell. And people will probably respond in a variety of ways. The stories do not mean only one thing. They are uniquely connected with God and may set our experience of subjection to political and economic powers beyond our control in the context of God's presence in our midst.

Telling the Story

The spirit and style of biblical storytelling is a spirit of sharing. Telling the stories of God is something that everyone can do well. It requires only someone who will live with the story, let it grow in them, and then tell it to another person. And the most basic time for telling these stories is when two or three persons are together.

Stories can be interpreted in many ways. The most important criterion is that the telling should fit the story and the teller. Don't perform or worry about how you are telling it. Having studied and lived with the story, you have prepared enough. Concentrate on the story and on the wonder of Jesus' birth. If you forget, improvise the best you can and just go on. If you remember later in the story, say "Did I tell you that...?" Trust the story.

Telling a biblical story is offering a gift. And there are times when a particular gift is uniquely appropriate. The story of Jesus' birth can be a gift when another person or group feels oppressed or alone. It is usually appropriate to ask whether or not a person would like to hear a story. But if you sense that someone might find the story a gift, offer it to them. They may find it meaningful or they may not. A listener to these stories is free to respond in whatever way he or she chooses, including not at all.

There are also many occasions in which telling this story to a group will be a gift. That requires more practice and care in the telling. The effective telling of a story to a large group is an interpretive art. It has its own challenges and subtleties, as does music or painting. And growth in the art of biblical storytelling is a worthy investment of time and attention. In this story, there are nuances of voice, emotion, inflection, volume, gesture, and pause that may help to make the story live for a group. I would suggest that you tell this story first to children or a small group of friends during the Christmas season. But at any time of the year, many groups will be glad to hear the story of Jesus' birth.

There is a story about the telling of this story that has the surprise and depth of this good news. This account has been written by Paul Neff, an American Baptist pastor, who was at that time working in a small church in Brooklin on the coast of Maine:

I was chaplain for the day at the regional hospital. I noticed that a boy from our town who went to the Pentecostal church was on the patient list. Since it was a regional hospital, we pastors would also visit anyone from our town, regardless of where or whether they went to church. I entered the room of the small boy. It was shortly before Christmas. The little boy was drawing.

"Hello," I said, "my name is Rev. Neff." No response. The little boy keeps drawing.

"I'm the chaplain for the day, and I thought you might like someone to talk to for a bit." No answer. The little boy continues drawing.

"I hear you're a Pentecostal. Do you go to church very often?"

"Sometimes," he said. The little boy goes on drawing.

"Would you like me to tell you a story?"

"Okay." And he kept on drawing.

And so I began to tell him Luke's story of Jesus' birth. I had hardly gotten started when the little boy put down his drawing pencil and began to look at me. About half way through the story, I noticed that tears had begun to roll down his cheeks. When I finished, I asked him, "Why are you crying?"

He said, "It must have been awful lonely for the baby there in the manger."

"It's awful lonely for you here, too, isn't it?" I said. He shook his head and so began our conversation.