

Origins and Reboots

Now that my children are older, we are able to watch together movies that are not explicitly aimed at children. We have recently been working our way through some of the Marvel back catalogue. A common trope in the superhero movie genre is the idea of the 'origin' story. It typically goes that a once ordinary person is exposed to some kind of extraordinary experience which enhances their characteristics and strengths such that they are now able to perform superhuman feats of bravery. This kind of backstory is often coupled with a renewed sense of vocation, too, as the hero wrestles with the responsibilities associated with their new powers. The stories often involve an amount of personal sacrifice; inevitably, the hero loses something in the exchange but ultimately is successful in vanquishing some form of evil villain.

It is tempting to see the beginning chapters of the gospel according to Matthew and Luke as simply origin stories: they certainly tell the circumstances of Jesus' birth, which had clearly become a key question for the early Christians. Both Matthew and Luke, writing later than Mark, see it as important that the early Christians understood some key ideas about Jesus' origins, particularly the virgin birth, as well as the birth location of Bethlehem, King David's town. These two facets of the Nativity story would help them make sense of both Jesus' claims to sovereignty and to deity. These now familiar accounts of where Jesus came from and how he was born were important aspects of understanding the credentials of the man Jesus, the Messiah of God, who is also God himself, come to rescue all people from their sins and establish His renewed Kingdom on Earth. These details, whilst important, are not the whole story, however.

This is because the Nativity is not a simple origin story. It also belongs to another subgenre of narrative: the 'Reboot'. A reboot is when a familiar story is retold, perhaps with a new central actor, or updated with a different focus to an original version. Rather than seeing the Nativity as just Jesus' origin story, where God's light came into the world in the form of an infant, we should also see it as a kind of reboot, where His light re-enters the world but this time in an unexpectedly remarkable form and for an unexpectedly remarkable purpose.

The gospel of John approaches Jesus' origin story in this way. Rather than focus on the circumstances of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem at the beginning of his gospel, John explains instead that the arrival of the Son of God in human form is actually a reboot of a much older story. John tells us that:

'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

Those first three words, 'in the beginning', transport us right back to the first words of the Bible in Genesis chapter 1, where God creates the world and everything in it. And God's first word of creative command in that remarkable story was, 'Let there be light'. It was the light that gave the world its form – it gave shape to the darkness, even creating time itself; it brought order to chaos. John goes on to explain that 'the light' that 'shines in the darkness' is in fact Jesus, and that this origin story of a child born in Bethlehem is also a continuation and fulfilment of the very first origin story at the beginning of the Bible, when God made a good world he longed to share with the human beings he had made in His image. Somehow, this new story of a baby born in Bethlehem was the catalyst for a new creative work that God was doing in our midst, a rebooted world where those that simply choose to receive Jesus and believe in His name will 'see His glory' and will be given 'the right to become children of God'.

This is why the Christmas story is like a reboot – it's not an entirely new story where God decided to cancel his earlier plans and try something new: it's rather a fresh, creative moment where the Light of God, the Son, steps again into a dark world in order to bring new life to a chaotic and disordered Earth and to the people who inhabit it, who have forgotten their original vocation as human beings.

The really good news is that this story is therefore a reboot for us too, for you and for me.

Jesus is not the only character in the Nativity story, although he is the central one. Surrounding the baby Jesus are a collection of human beings who are each given an opportunity to be part of the reboot story of God and his people. Humans, who for so long had walked in darkness (and continue to do so), are given an opportunity to come into the light and, in so doing, reboot their sense of vocation and purpose.

The first visitors who come to Jesus' birthplace tell us something about the new cast of this reboot story. The Shepherds, lowly outsiders with little worth in human society, are the first visitors to reboot their vocation. They fulfil the role that every human being is designed for: they 'spread the word' (Luke 2:17) about what they have witnessed and then they return home 'glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen' (Luke 2:20). The Shepherds tell us that this reboot story invites all who find themselves on the fringes of society: the poor, the needy, the destitute, the suffering, the disabled, the homeless, the shamed – it is people such as these who are first invited into the Kingdom to reboot their human identities, and to become witnesses and worshippers of the God of the Universe. If you are someone who feels that they have lost their sense of purpose, or that you lack worth and status in today's society, then this Jesus is for you.

So, too, the Magi are invited to reboot their stories: Gentiles from a foreign land follow the light of Jesus with the eyes of faith and find themselves suddenly close to the God of Israel as worshippers. The gospel of Matthew tells us their response to the baby Jesus was that they 'bowed down and worshipped him' (Matthew 2:11), and then returned home by another route – a rebooted pathway, if you will. They resisted the commands and desires of King Herod, finding their identity and worth instead in a new Kingdom of Heaven here on Earth. If you are someone who feels on the outside of church, who looks with the eyes of faith but does not quite know the words to say, then this Jesus is for you.

The message, of course, is that this Jesus is for everyone; he came to be the light to all nations and peoples.

And so, the Christmas story is an invitation that falls to all of us in this dark season to reboot our understanding of who we are as human beings in this beautiful, fallen world and to choose to seek out the light of Jesus amidst the darkness. As it says in Isaiah 60:

'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.

See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples,
But the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.'

If we seek Him out this Christmas, and believe that He is that same Word, the Light that first gave the Universe its form and can still give light today even in the thick darkness we are living in, we will reboot our understanding of who we are as human beings. We will be Children of God, made in His image, as God had always intended. We were made to be worshippers and witnesses, a royal priesthood on the Earth; this is the human vocation, and until we fully live this vocation we will never know what it means to be fully human. The Christmas story is not a simple origin story: it is a reboot opportunity.

God invites you and me today to approach the throne of Jesus as true worshippers, those that seek the light in the thick darkness. Let us bring to him our hearts, our minds, our energies, our gifts, and ask that he might reboot our purposes and lead us to fulfil our true human vocation in the season to come, that is, to help bring about His Kingdom, on Earth as it is in Heaven.