

What is Christianity?

By Colleen Messina

If you found a time machine, traveled back to the first century A.D., and landed in Judea, you might hear about a man who could reportedly walk on water. According to the locals, this man was either a great teacher or an outright rebel. Jesus Christ was the most controversial person in the Roman Empire! Christianity, the world's largest religion, is based on his teachings.

The story of Jesus' birth is the story of Christmas. According to the Bible, the angel Gabriel appeared to a Jewish woman named Mary. Although she was a virgin, the angel told her that she was going to have a baby who would be the Messiah. This was startling news! Jews had hoped that a savior, or Messiah, would come to free them from Roman tyranny. The baby Jesus is traditionally shown with his parents, Mary and Joseph, in a stable full of animals. Angels hover brightly above. Shepherds stand close by. This "nativity scene" is often set up during Christmastime.



We don't know many details about Jesus' life. We don't even know what he looked like. Christians believe that Jesus was a precocious young man who thought of God as his Father. He became a carpenter, but his wisdom exceeded his years. He even explained the Old Testament scriptures to the wise men of the temple when he was only 12! When Jesus turned 30, he gathered a band of disciples, and he began preaching, teaching, and healing. He left no writings behind except symbols in the sand, but his disciples loved him so much that they left their homes to follow him.

Jesus had a riveting message. He taught that people needed to repent, or ask for forgiveness for their sins. He taught about love and the Kingdom of God. However, he didn't always teach quietly. Sometimes, he shouted. Sometimes, he did surprising things, even in the holiest place in Jerusalem.

Tables were set up inside the temple so people could to buy animals to sacrifice for Passover. They came from all over Judea for this holiday, and they had different kinds of money. People had to exchange their money for the local currency in order to buy things in Jerusalem, and the moneychangers did that job. Jesus thought that that was terrible! He knocked the tables over and told the people to stop turning his Father's house into a marketplace!

Jesus' disciples believed that he was the Messiah, or the incarnation of God who came to Earth to bring salvation to mankind. They believed that he set an example for his students to follow. His best known sermon is called the Sermon on the Mount which contained the Lord's Prayer. Jesus gave this sermon at a mountain near Capernaum which was supposedly the site of an extinct volcano. The Lord's Prayer became the most well known prayer of Christianity.

Jesus often taught in parables with secret messages, like the story of the lost sheep. According to the Bible, Jesus asked the Pharisees and scribes whether they would go after one lost sheep, even if they had ninety-nine others. If they found their lost sheep, they would certainly bring the animal home. They might say, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep which was lost." The Bible says that "...there will likewise be more joy in heaven over one repentant sinner than over ninety-nine righteous people who have no need to repent." (Luke 15:2-7)

While many people loved Jesus, the chief priests and the Roman authorities did not. They felt threatened by his message. One of Jesus' disciples, Judas Iscariot, made a deal for 30 pieces of silver. He betrayed Jesus. Jesus was tried as a criminal and then crucified on a cross. According to the Bible, Jesus rose from the dead three days later. He appeared to his disciples and taught them for 40 days. He told them to spread the gospel, or the "good news" to all people. Jesus ascended to heaven. Christians believe that Jesus achieved victory over death and that his death made forgiveness of sin possible.

Because Jesus died on a cross, one of the most popular symbols of the Christian faith is the cross. Many Christians wear crosses around their necks on a chain, and many churches have crosses on their altars or walls. Another