

The Nativity

Luke 2:1-20

Two young boys were spending the night at their grandparents' house the week before Christmas. At bedtime, they knelt beside their beds. The younger one began praying at the top of his lungs:

"I PRAY FOR A NEW BICYCLE ... I PRAY FOR A NEW NINTENDO ..."

His older brother leaned over, nudged him and said, "Why are you shouting? God isn't deaf." to which the little brother replied, "No, but Grandma is!"

Gifts are great, but clearly, as Christians, we must take time to reflect on the greatest gift of all. Long before secular advocacy groups were trying to sever Christmas from its true roots, the materialism and indifference of good people with no ax to grind was already getting that job done.

Reflect with me as two travelers, a husband and his wife, migrate from Galilee to Bethlehem, a small town just a few miles south of Jerusalem. Joseph was from Bethlehem. A worldwide census now compelled him to return there to register and to pay his tax for the privilege of existing as a Roman citizen. Bethlehem had a long and storied history, and perhaps, there burned in Joseph a gentle sense of nostalgia as the tiny village became visible, surrounded by its hills and vineyards.

Perhaps, through Joseph's mind, there raced scenes of Jacob who laid his beloved Rachel to rest nearby. He may have envisioned Naomi, Ruth as well as the other gentle women of antiquity gleaning in the local grain fields. How could he not picture his own ancestor Jesse and his seven sons, the youngest of whom learned to sling a stone with precision accuracy as one of his responsibilities for tending sheep? In these nearby hills, David mastered the harp and honed his skills as a songwriter. This same David grew up to become Israel's greatest king. Bethlehem was also the home of his two great generals, Joab and Abishai. Now, as this ordinary man drew near to the village, only he and Mary owned a certain unique insight into a certain ancient prophecy.

²"But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times." - Micah 5:2

Joseph knew what a special place his hometown had been in Israel's history, but now, only he and Mary knew how special a place Bethlehem would become, for only they knew the identity of the very special child Mary was carrying. But I suspect that even they were short on the details of what the birth of Jesus would be like. They could never have anticipated just how rustic and strange the accommodations would be. They might have expected that somehow God would step into their world mightily so as to make the birth of His Son a conspicuous event, and He did. The birth of Christ was conspicuous, but only to Mary and Joseph, the angels of Heaven and a few shepherds in the nearby countryside. All in all, the event that gives this season its unique meaning was simple, inconspicuous - but strangely glorious. Let us consider the details together.

I. The Spectacle of Nativity (Luke 2:1-7)

A. Jesus Was Born in the Midst of a World Census verses 1-5

¹In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world.
²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³And everyone went to his own town to register.

⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.

A census was taken every fourteen years throughout the Roman Empire for a two-fold purpose. The census assisted Rome in taxing the population and it documented who was available for induction into the Roman military. The tax issue was the only factor that affected Joseph, because Rome had exempted the cantankerous Jews had being compelled to serve in the Roman military.

The tax burden imposed by Rome on provincials was oppressive. Income, transportation, produce - all these were taxed. I have lived in four states and six counties. I mean to offend no one when I share that Lancaster County's O.P.T., *Occupational Privilege Tax*, is the oddest tax I've ever encountered. It's just a few dollars a year, but it is levied on citizens simply because they have jobs. Rome had an even more curious tax than the O.P.T. We'll call it the E.P.T. or the *Existence Privilege Tax*. This tax was due simply for the privilege of existing in the Roman Empire.

Bethlehem, like every village, would be overcrowded during such a census. Men had to register in their city of origin. Joseph lived in Nazareth, nowhere near Bethlehem, but Bethlehem was his city of record, so off he ventured. During such a census, we may envision "people-upon-people" migration. Thousands vied for passage, and lodging was a matter of "dog-eat-dog." Ordinarily, noteworthy citizens became faces in the crowd. Obscure people became even less significant. This was a strange circumstance into which God would send His Son. People were too busy to appreciate the "person-hood" or individuality of anyone else among the throngs of humanity. No one would ever notice an out-of-town carpenter or his pregnant wife.

B. Jesus Was Laid in a Manger Because a Local Inn Was Over-Booked verses 6, 7

... ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

It would have been nothing special if Jesus had actually been born in the typical inn of that day. Many such inns were nothing more than a row of stalls that provided simple shelter from the elements. An innkeeper typically furnished fodder for livestock and a fire upon which to cook. These abodes bore little similarity to the *Hotel Hershey* or even a *Motel 6*. At best, had there been a vacancy, Jesus might have been born in a facility not unlike a modern rental storage building.

Artists depict Jesus as having been born in a stable somewhere in Bethlehem and laid in a manger because even the crude stalls that passed as inns were filled. We cannot know whether the stable that housed this manger was a structure, a lean-to, or a cave. In fact, it is only traditional speculation that there even was a stable. The manger in which Mary placed Jesus could very well have been "under the stars." We are told only enough to tell us that the birth of the Son of God occurred in a very primitive and unlikely setting - certainly not a setting fit for Heaven's King.

God would have had it no other way. Jesus' birth did not need to occur in a plush setting. It did not even need to be a wee bit statelier. Any symbol of human affluence would have only robbed the scene of its glory, because such symbols always tend to blind people to things all-important. We struggle already in recognizing the worthlessness of things. Why would God further confound that tendency in us by cloaking the birth of His Son in anything but the crudest simplicity?

Jesus came to the human race garbed in lowliness so that we would be drawn to Him by the substance of His character rather than by any "skin-deep" attraction. Our modern notions of what is successful and valuable are usually just mere reflections of our materialistic affections. At times, they are even misleading and hellish. Consider how Jesus was described by one ancient prophet:

²He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. – Isaiah 53:2

It would serve no divine purpose whatsoever for God to send a Messiah who could identify with the human race at their loftiest and most affluent point. We needed a Savior Who could identify with us at our lowest and most broken point - up to our necks in a personal sinfulness that disqualifies us from fellowship with a holy God. Jesus came, not to ascend a throne as do earthly kings, but to remove our sin so that we can be restored to holiness. Isaiah continues:

⁴Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed. – Isaiah 53:4, 5

Jesus had to be of lowly birth in order to identify with every man. Man, in his distorted way of seeing the world might call it the lowest common denominator. This does not mean, however, that the birth of Jesus was devoid of unspeakable glory. It just takes spiritual eyes to see it.

II. The Spectators of Nativity (Luke 2:8-20)

⁸And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. ⁹An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

¹³Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,

¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests."

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about."

¹⁶So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.

²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

A. Consider the Angels

What was barely noticeable to men was abundantly evident to the angels of God. They sang a message of "Peace on earth." Historically, we do know of a militaristic lull of activity in Rome around the time of Christ's birth. It was quite unusual that an imperialistic force like Rome was not off warring with someone. In Rome itself during such rare instances, the gates of the temple of Janus, the Roman god of war, were closed. They were not closed very often, but we know that the world was experiencing one such rare moment of peace at around the time Jesus was born.

Of course, the angels sang of more than a temporary lull in military aggression. The gates of Janus would be thrown open only too soon. In about seventy years, within only a few miles of this very spot where the angels appeared to the shepherds, Jerusalem would be destroyed by Roman forces. Blood would flow. Jesus prophesied that not one stone would remain standing on another. These angels were singing of a peace that only Christ could procure - peace between God and men.

"Peace on earth" is not a warm, fuzzy, Christmas greeting. The angels sang of an enduring peace that is secured when a sinner's iniquity is atoned for and he is restored to fellowship with his Creator and Father through the blood of Jesus Christ. Jesus liberates the human race from its fiercest oppressor, Satan. He looses a person's heaviest shackles, that person's own sinful nature.

B. Consider the Shepherds

Who were these shepherds? The *Mishna*, a cumbersome record of Jewish rules and traditions, records that the sheep for the daily temple sacrifices were fed in the pastures of Bethlehem. Bethlehem was only six miles from the temple at Jerusalem. It is very possible that these were the very shepherds that watched over the temple flocks. How strangely appropriate that the first human witnesses to the Lamb of God Who would take away the sins of the world may have been the very men who watched over the sheep that were symbolically sacrificed for the sins of Israel.

Why shepherds? Good, meticulously-orthodox Jews had little use for shepherds, and that precisely may be the answer to the question, "Why shepherds?" The job of shepherding was quite demanding, and these herdsmen didn't bother themselves with most religious regulations, traditions or ceremonies. Shepherds were despised by the Pharisees even though they were more vital to worship among the Jews than was the sum-total of Pharisees in the land. They tended the sacrificial flocks. These were simple, weathered men of the field and at the bottom of the Jewish social scale. Nevertheless, these were the first recipients of the glad tidings of the coming of Messiah as well as the first human heralds of the new-born King.

C. Consider Mary

Verse 19 says: "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Mary and Joseph knew the identity of this child in the manger, but that could not mean that either of them understood what to expect on this night of His birth. Had they anticipated some fanfare? Surely, they had expected more than a manger imposed on them due to an over-crowded inn in an over-crowded town. They could never have expected these smelly old shepherds to show up.

There would be other such events to treasure and to ponder. Mary would take the baby to the temple to have him formally presented and circumcised according to Mosaic Law. A pair of old folks, Simeon and Anna, would approach her, clearly recognizing that she held in her arms the Consolation and Redeemer of the people of God (Luke 2:21-38). Joseph and Mary would settle in Bethlehem and at some point within two years, a group of Persian Magi would come to their home to present the child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh (Matthew 2:1-12).

Mary's Son would be found at age twelve discussing heady matters with the most erudite scholars in Jerusalem (Luke 2:41-50). She would be there during the years as "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men" (Luke 2:52). Jesus began His public ministry at a wedding feast in Cana. When the wine was gone, Mary knew to link-up the servants in charge of refreshments with Jesus and to instruct them, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:1-11). Of course, a sword would one day pierce Mary's own soul (Luke 2:35). She would see Him die.

Because Mary has been wrongly exalted to a posture of co-Mediator with Christ in some circles, many in Christendom have recoiled from giving Jesus' mother her due. Before Christ was born, Mary praised God saying: "... From now on all generations will call me blessed ..." (Luke 1:48). Why wouldn't we? Two millennia later, we ought to reflect on Mary as God's vessel and as a witness to all He gave us in Jesus. Mediator between man and God? Not at all! Perpetual Virgin? Why? Immaculately conceived as was Jesus? Likely not. Blessed? Absolutely!

Conclusion

In the rush of last minute Christmas shopping coupled with bargain hunting, a woman bought a box of fifty identical greeting cards. Her list only numbered forty-nine. Without even bothering to read the verse, she hastily signed and addressed all but one of them. Several days after they had been mailed, she came across the one remaining card, and she finally took the time to read the message inside. She was horrified to read: "This card is just to say ... a little gift is on the way."

It seems that the expenses and logistics of just pulling-off Christmas get more complicated every year for the average family. The gifts, the school events, the social events, the church events, the cards, the Christmas letter, the crowds at the mall, the preparations for entertaining - the schedule can be grueling. Still, the kid in me has never dreaded an approaching Christmas yet. Through all of it, we are wise to make ourselves remember what lies at the heart of this joyous time of the year. One song-writer puts his reflections this way, and we will conclude with his words:

*Today, the God of Majesty has given to the earth
A gift of such magnificence, we could never judge its worth.
And the rudeness of the setting just ignites the jewel's fire,
A pearl beyond the greatest price, the joy of man's desire.*

-Don Francisco

This Christmas, enjoy God's Indescribable Gift.

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