

A Promise Kept, Part 3

The Birth of Jesus

Luke 2:1-20

A new holiday trend is literally turning a traditional Christmas celebration upside down. Hammacher Schlemmer, a retail company based in New York, has sold-out of their unique yuletide decoration: the Upside-Down Christmas Tree. Standing at 7-feet tall and pre-lit with over 800 commercial grade lights, this technological marvel could have been yours for only \$599.95. Why an upside-down tree? According to Hammacher Schlemmer's website: 1) You can place it in more locations such as between two armchairs. 2) The inverted shape makes it easier to see ornaments, which hang away from the dense needles. 3) It allows more room for the accumulation of presents underneath.

We are cautious about the commercialization of Christmas. I have crossed my fingers this whole season, hoping that I would not see on TV a depiction of an angelic appearance to some terrified shepherds in which the angel says, "I bring you glad tidings of great joy! I just saved a bundle on my car insurance by switching to Geico."

It has been strange and odd for me to read about a number of churches across the country that have cancelled their services this morning. I've been looking forward to Christmas falling on a Sunday for nine years. Christmas directs our attention to the most remarkable miracle in the history of mankind. God became a man. To me, it is a gift that our celebration of the Lord's birth falls on the first day of the week, a day when believers throughout the ages have gathered to worship their God.

Reflect with me upon two travelers from Galilee as they migrate to Bethlehem, a small uncelebrated town to the south, in the province of Judea, just six miles south of Jerusalem. Among the locals, Bethlehem had a long and storied history. There must have been a sense of nostalgia and pride as the tiny village that was their ancestral home became visible, surrounded by its hills and vineyards.

Perhaps, racing through their minds were images of Jacob laying to rest his beloved Rachel. They may have envisioned Naomi and Ruth working in the local grain fields. How could they not picture Jesse and his seven sons, the youngest of whom learned to sling a stone with precision accuracy so as to protect his father's flocks? In the nearby hills, David mastered the harp and lyre as he honed his skills as a writer of psalms. This same David became the greatest Jewish king to date. But now, as these two inconspicuous sojourners approached the village, they shared a unique insight into an ancient prophecy:

*"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*

Only Joseph and Mary knew how special a place Bethlehem was, for only they knew the identity of the special child in Mary's womb that would be born here. They were not troubled that Jesus was to be born in this obscure place, but even they could not have anticipated just how rustic and strange would be the accommodations for His birth. Mary and Joseph must have suspected that somehow God would step in to make the birth of His own Son a conspicuous event., and He would, but it would only be conspicuous to Mary and Joseph, to Heaven's angels and to a handful of shepherds in the nearby countryside. All in all, the birth of God's Son was simple and inconspicuous, but strangely glorious.

I. An Unlikely Backdrop for a Royal Birth (Luke 2:1-7)

A. A Worldwide 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. Firstly, it assisted Rome in taxing the population. Rome loved to tax its citizens and provincials, and indeed, much revenue was required to run a governmental machine like the Roman Empire. Rome taxed income, transportation, produce – even human existence. In other words, if the emperor knew you existed, you were taxed for the privilege of living under Roman rule. Secondly, such censuses documented who was available for induction into the Roman military. The Jews despised the Roman presence and historically had behaved in such an unruly fashion that Jewish men were exempted from serving in the military. So, the taxation aspect of this census was the only factor that affected Joseph.

Provincial males had to register for such a census in their city of origin. Joseph lived in Nazareth, but Bethlehem was his city of record. He was of the line of David, so what was a village carpenter to do? Off he ventured on a journey of about 80 miles that would require several days. The trip would have been all the more difficult given the fact that his wife was almost ready to deliver a baby.

Bethlehem, like every village in the Empire that was many centuries old, would be overcrowded during a census. The town would be filled with people crawling all over one another as they vied for lodging. No one would stand out from anyone else in such a setting. This was a strange circumstance into which God would send His Son. Who would notice one out-of-town carpenter or his pregnant wife?

B. A Manger near an Over-Booked Inn 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 been born in such an inn, which was likely nothing more than a row of stalls that provided simple shelter from the elements. The guests provided their own food. An innkeeper only furnished fodder for the livestock and a fire upon which to cook. At best, Jesus might have been born in a facility not unlike a modern rental storage unit. But even so crude an accommodation as an ancient inn was booked, so the newly-born Jesus was placed in a manger.

Our ornamental crèches assume a certain look of a crudely-constructed stable with animals looking on. The presence of the animals makes perfect sense, but we cannot know whether the actual stable that housed Jesus' manger was a barn, a lean-to or a cave. In fact, we don't really even know if there was a stable. Commentator William Barclay pictures a number of these rows of stalls called "the inn" sharing a common courtyard where the manger in which Mary placed Jesus was situated "under the stars." If the stable was a cave, the manger would have been a trough hewn out of the rock of an interior wall. We are granted much latitude in picturing the scene. What is abundantly clear is that the birth of the Son of God took place in a very primitive setting - certainly not one befitting a King.

God would have had it no other way. Jesus' birth didn't need to be a little statelier or a wee bit more comfortable. Any trapping of human stateliness would only have confused matters, because the material trappings of position tend to confuse us. We innately have a hard time appreciating the emptiness of material things. Why would God choose to further confound the narcissistic tendencies in people 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." Consider how Jesus was described by one ancient prophet:

... He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
³He was despised and rejected by men,
a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering.
Like one from whom men hide their faces
he was despised, and we esteemed him not. – Isaiah 53:2b, 3

It would serve no divine purpose whatsoever for God to send a *Messiah* who could identify only with the loftiest and most affluent members of the race. Jesus came to identify with all mankind and at its greatest point of need – broken because of the 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 might be restored to holiness and be granted access to the throne room of God. Isaiah continues:

⁴ Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
⁵ But 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.
⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him
the iniquity of us all. – Isaiah 53:4-6

Jesus had to be born into humble circumstances in order to destroy all human preoccupation with human greatness. The Savior of the world had to identify with humanity's weakest and meekest, not its highest and mightiest. This does not mean that the birth of Jesus was devoid of any kind of glory. But, the glory present could not be the kind that any human scriptwriter could imagine for the birth of a King.

II. An Unlikely Entourage for a Royal Baby (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. Heaven's Angels Were There

What was barely noticeable to men was abundantly evident to the angels of God. They sang a message of "Peace on earth." Historically, we know of a militaristic lull of activity for Rome around the time of Christ's birth. It was unusual that the Empire was not at war with someone. In Rome itself during such rare instances, the gates of the temple of Janus, the Roman god of war, were closed. His powers were not required. The world was experiencing one such rare moment of peace, but that peace was neither perfect nor enduring. This world has seen much violence, warring and bloodshed since.

The angels were singing of more than a temporary lull in military aggression. The gates of Janus would be thrown open only too soon. In about seventy years, probably within sight of the 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.

¹Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, ²through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand. And we rejoice in the hope of the glory of God. - Romans 5:1

"Peace on earth" is not a warm, fuzzy, Christmas feeling. The angels sang of the 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 Christ. Jesus liberates the human race from its fiercest oppressor, Satan. He looses a person's heaviest shackles, and those are the shackles of his own sinfulness.

B. Bethlehem's Shepherds Were There

Who were these particular shepherds? The *Mishna*, a cumbersome record of Jewish rules and traditions, records that the sheep for the daily 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 same shepherds who 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 cared for the sheep that were symbolically sacrificed for the sins of Israel.

Why shepherds? Good, meticulously-orthodox Jews had little use for shepherds. They were considered untrustworthy and uncouth by the community at large. The religious folk particularly looked down on them because a shepherd's responsibilities to his flocks were too demanding for him to stay current on all the meticulous rituals of a pharisaic-style approach to worshipping God. These were simple, weathered men of the field and at the bottom of the Jewish social scale even though, if these were indeed the shepherds that tended the temple flocks, they were of greater real value to the religious world of the Jews than were all the Pharisees in the land. In any event, these shepherds were the first recipients of the glad tidings of *Messiah* as well as the first human heralds of the new-born King.

C. Mary and Joseph Were There

Mary and Joseph both knew that this child in the manger was the Son of God and the Savior of Israel, but could either of them have known 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 shepherds to appear. Still, verse 19 says: "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart."

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. An old man named Simeon and an old prophetess named Anna immediately recognized that she held in her arms the Consolation and Redeemer of the people of God. Joseph and Mary would settle in Bethlehem. There a group of Persian Magi would visit their home and present the child with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. God would continue to intervene in their lives. When Herod heard that a king was born in Bethlehem, he ordered that every child under two years of age be slaughtered in that town. God warned Joseph to take the family and flee into Egypt. He called the family out of Egypt when Herod died.

Mary's Son would be found at age twelve discussing erudite matters with the finest scholars in Jerusalem. She was 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 enough to link-up the servants in charge of refreshments with Jesus and to instruct them, "Do whatever he tells you" (John 2:1-11). And, of course, a sword would one day pierce Mary's own soul according to Simeon's prophecy. She would watch Jesus die on a cross.

All of these wonders would come together for Mary, who we find numbered with the other disciples after her Son was raised from the dead and shown to be the Son of God. Jesus was born to die the most purposeful death in the history of the world. Because we are sinners, we are each destined to die once. But Jesus was no sinner. This child showed us what it meant to walk with God. And after living His life fully before the face of God, unmarred by any taint of personal vice, Jesus was indeed the unblemished Lamb of God, fully qualified to bear the guilt of sin for many brothers. As precious as the images of Christmas are, may the manger never be distant in your mind from the cross for it was on the cross that Jesus secured that peace of which the angels sang.