

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

We've just about completed our journey towards Christmas.

Alleluia! Joy to the World!

Garth Brooks' career was launched by a song about friends in low places, where no one has the social graces. The song pretty well describes the occasion of the Lord's birth. Jesus' birth is first announced to shepherds, the lowest of the low, and takes place in a cave surrounded by a bunch of herd animals. Of all the proclamations Christians make, isn't this one of the most astonishing and, in turn, one of the most revealing of God's nature?

What an odd sign

During our Advent journey we've seen a few signposts pointing us toward the Good News that is Christmas. Isaiah looked ahead to a day when light would crowd out the darkness and God would again be king. Zechariah, standing amidst the swirling scent of burning incense, was visited by an angel of the Lord who brought the astounding news that his wife would bear a son who would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). Mary too was visited by the angel Gabriel. She, a virgin, would give birth to a son. But unlike her cousin, Elizabeth, Mary's son will be the “Son of the Most High,” the “Son of God.” These are most extraordinary events. Yet, when we get to Jesus' actual birth, everything seems quite ordinary, or worse, for Mary and Joseph.

The two of them have made their way to Bethlehem for the census-taking, finding it a very crowded place. They've found a home in which to stay, though it seems that they

have to sleep where the animals usually do.¹ In all likelihood, they are sent to a nearby cave for shelter, a cave where some herd animals are kept and other creatures probably wander in. There, Mary has her baby and then places her newborn in a feed-trough. There are no angels, no wise men, no gifts. Just an ordinary, painful, and messy birth.

From his simple story of Jesus' birth, Luke shifts the scene to a nearby hillside. There, shepherds are gathered for the night, guarding their herds. It is to them, not to any of Judea's prominent and powerful citizens, nor even to Mary and Joseph, that an angel of God comes, proclaiming "good news of great joy." Jesus has been born. The angel gives the shepherds a sign – but certainly *not* the sort of sign we would expect to accompany such a momentous proclamation. There is nothing miraculous about the sign, it is simply "a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." The shepherds hurry to find the baby and when they do, they run with breathless excitement to tell Mary and Joseph about the angels.

Fred Craddock writes, "These two, busy with the chores of childbirth under the most difficult of conditions, do not themselves experience heaven's visit but hear of it from the shepherds. How unusual! But theirs is the baby, and that is enough."²

Savior . . . Messiah . . . Lord

It is reasonable to suppose that even lowly shepherds in ancient Jewish Palestine would have grasped the consequences of the angels' proclamation that this infant, born in King David's city, was "a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord" (v. 11). It is all there, packed into those few, brief words.

Though it boggles the mind, Mary's tiny squealing infant was the Deliverer and Redeemer, the anointed of God, Ruler and Master of all creation. Augustus, who had pronounced his own father divine (making himself the "son of god"), was no more than a bit player in the new world created by the birth of Mary's baby. God had burst onto the world scene in a new way, turning it upside down. He had raised up the lowly and the humble. It was to the meek and in the lowest of places that the true Son of God, the Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, had been born. Unlike Augustus, this child was not the bringer of mighty military victories but the bringer of God's peace, and not just for a few, but for all (v.10).

For his part, Augustus never even heard about this baby. But within a hundred years, his successors would be trying to wipe out the baby's followers. And in little more than 300 years, the Roman Emperor himself would become a Christian. The empire of the Caesars is long gone, but the kingdom of this baby is without end. Rejoice! Immanuel!

Is Christmas Day the end of the holidays or the beginning?

With all that said, here's the problem: Christians have never been able to do a very good job at *Christianizing* Christmas. In the early centuries of Christianity, Christians didn't try to keep Christmas at all. Even when Christians began to try to "take over" the winter festivals they had limited success. Many of our most cherished Christmas traditions never had anything to do with the birth of Jesus Christ. Yule logs, evergreen, feasts, gift-giving and more were all part of these festivals and as Christians created Christmas, they did their best to incorporate them all.

This isn't all bad. Celebrations, families, giving gifts – these are all good things in themselves, but they create an uncomfortable tension with the sacred at Christmas. Lawrence Wood notes that, at times, Christians have nearly managed to kill Christmas

¹ Though we translate the Greek word in v. 7, *kataluma*, as "inn," this was not some sort of hotel; there was another word for that.

² from Fred Craddock's commentary on Luke in the *Interpretation* series, Abingdon Press, 1990.

in their attempts to Christianize the holiday. The English Puritans pretty well outlawed the holiday, insisting that stores stay open on December 25 and that parliament meet. Keeping Christmas was illegal in the Plymouth Colony. Gratefully, Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* was in part responsible for the restoration of Christmas in the mid-nineteenth century.³

So, Christians' uneasiness with Christmas is nothing new, and the tension is taken to ever new heights with the unending expansion of the commercial holiday. So much so that it increasingly seems like Christmas ends with Christmas Day, rather than beginning with it.

Yet, Christmas marks the transition from preparing for Christ's arrival to celebrating it. We gather on Christmas Eve to celebrate that singular moment when God became

Why December 25?

From its earliest days, the Christian church celebrated Jesus' resurrection at Easter. However, it was several centuries later that Christians began to celebrate Jesus' birth.

A common, but probably incorrect, belief is that Christians picked December 25 because it was in the middle of an important Roman pagan holiday celebrating the winter solstice. The problem is that the first mention of a date for Christmas is from about 200AD and the earliest celebrations that we know about were late in the third century – before Christianity became the state religion and began to incorporate pagan customs. There is a better explanation for December 25.

In keeping with Jewish traditions about the prophets, many early Christians believed that Jesus was conceived and died on the same date. One early and prominent Christian, Tertullian, writing about 200AD, calculated that the day of Jesus' death recorded in the Gospels was March 25 on the Roman solar calendar. Thus, March 25 would have been seen as the date of Jesus' conception. Indeed, the Roman Catholic Church celebrates the Feast of the Annunciation (the announcement to Mary that she would conceive) on March 25 each year. By 400AD, Augustine was referring to the "tradition" of Jesus' conception and crucifixion being on the same date. December 25 is simply nine months after March 25 and, thus, a very appropriate date to celebrate Jesus' birth.

flesh. We worship the God who is revealed to us in that tiny, slimy, squirming baby. It doesn't take any special wisdom to see that God is great . . . but a baby born to a peasant family in an out of the way corner of this planet? That, we could never figure out on our own.

In his book, *Christmas: A Candid History*, Bruce Forbes has a simple proposal for putting Christ back in Christmas: keep the twelve days of the Christmas season. On the traditional church calendar, the Season of Christmas begins with Advent and ends on January 6, the day we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. In the traditions of the western church, this day marked the arrival of the three wise men bearing gifts who, by doing so, reveal that the baby is Lord and King. What are known as the "twelve days" are those between Dec 25 and Jan 6.

Simple . . . all the trees and lights can go up as early as we like. Santa and the gifts can stay. But beginning on December 25 and for twelve days thereafter, we begin to focus on the birth of Jesus in a way that we can't in the hustle and bustle before the 25th.

You and I aren't going to stop the commercialization of Christmas or even slow it down. But we can begin to build personal and family traditions that incorporate our worship and celebration of the Christ-child into the twelve days of Christmas. Perhaps we can begin to put the Christ back in Christmas – after the 25th, if not before.

³From Wood's review in *Christian Century* of Bruce Forbes' new book, *Christmas, A Candid History*.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Though we try to domesticate this story so that it fits our nativity scenes, it builds into a world-changing challenge. Still, the story has pretty mundane beginnings. The Roman Emperor, Augustus, commands that a census take place in order to clean up the tax rolls. Such clean-ups happened regularly. Mary and Joseph find temporary lodging where Mary will give birth . . . pretty unexciting stuff. It is up to God's angels, God's messengers, to explain all this . . . to put it in context . . . to lay down the challenge. The world was used to Caesar's messengers carrying big news to the provinces. These angels, however, bring Big News of their own: the true Savior has been born. Caesar's world might think that Augustus was Lord, but the world was wrong. The true Lord, the Master of all creation, was lying in a feed-trough in a tiny town about five miles from Jerusalem. How could this be!?! The news brought by these herald angels is not just for the shepherds or for Mary and Joseph or even just for the Jews . . . this is *Big News* for all humankind.

This *Big News* poses big questions. *First*, who or what is really Lord, not just of my life, but of the world? Do I truly admit that Jesus is not only the master of me, but the master of everyone and everything? What does it really mean to confess that Jesus is Savior and Lord . . . in very practical everyday terms? *Second*, what does it mean (to me!) that God bypassed the powerful and successful at Jesus' birth, choosing instead two very ordinary and inconsequential people? In this birth, God has reversed all our notions of power and importance. How will I reflect this great reversal in my own life?

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Sermon Notes
