

Seeing the Familiar

December 24, 2002 – Christmas Eve
Background Study

Scripture Passage – 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.

Seeing the Familiar

Here is the problem with the Christmas story. We’ve all heard, read, and seen it performed so many times that we no longer take the time to read Luke’s (or Matthew’s) actual words. It isn’t that familiarity breeds contempt, but it can breed blindness. So, in this study, we will take a little closer look at the incredible, yet simple, story Luke tells.

First, historian that he is, Luke tells us when Jesus was born, where, and the circumstances. He wants us to know why Jesus was born in Bethlehem even though he grew up in Nazareth because of the Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah of the Jews would come from Bethlehem. Then, in a few brief sentences, Luke tells us of the baby’s birth. Evidently, there literally was no room in the inn, so Joseph and Mary sought shelter behind the inn, perhaps in a stable or even a cave. Mary’s baby was born there, wrapped tightly, and laid in a feed trough. This is a birth with which the poorest people on earth could identify. Look closely at verses 6 & 7. There are no angels, no soft light, no wise men – absolutely nothing of note – just a young couple and their newborn. We know the significance of this birth and we feel a need to embellish the story – but the real power of the story lies in its simple and poor dignity.

Good News of Great Joy!

In v. 10, the angel of the Lord says, “I bring you good news of great joy!” This announcement is foundational to all that follows in the New Testament. The Greek word translated “good news” (also “gospel”) is *evangelion*. In the Roman world of Jesus’ day, this was a word used to proclaim the birth of the emperor’s heir or the enthroning of a new emperor. This proclamation, the *evangelion* or “good news,” would be carried out to the Roman provinces by messengers and heralds. Here, the angel of the Lord (in Greek, *angelos* means “messenger”!) brings the proclamation that Jesus is born. Jesus is the Lord, not Caesar. It is Jesus who will bring “peace on earth,” not Augustus. Even shepherds would have realized the boldness of the angel’s message!

Luke quickly leaves the new parents and turns our attention to the hillsides outside Bethlehem. There, the angel of the Lord, the bearer of the Good News, doesn't come to Mary, but to some shepherds doing what shepherds do, tending their flocks and protecting their livelihood. After all, Mary already knows what is going on. The angel Gabriel had come to her nine months earlier to tell her that she would be the mother of the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:26-38). As Fred Craddock notes, the angels and the light of God's glory don't shine on the manger, but in the shepherd's field! The angels bring a most remarkable announcement to the shepherds and, through them, to us. The Savior is born! The Messiah has come! He is Lord and through him God's peace will come! Naturally, the shepherds are very shaken by the arrival of the angel.

After the angel's proclamation, the shepherds are given a most remarkable sign. Now, if you were offered a sign of something miraculous and world-changing, you'd expect that sign to be pretty spectacular. However, here, the sign that the angel gives the shepherds is simply the fact of a baby (v. 12) - nothing fancy or even out of the ordinary. Just as the circumstances of the Lord's birth are completely different from what most people would expect, even the sign is remarkable in its ordinariness.

The shepherds discuss among themselves what has happened and then head to Bethlehem to track down the infant. When they get to the stable, they evidently find that some other people have come to assist the young parents. Not surprisingly, everyone is "amazed"¹ to hear the shepherds' story. The shepherds are the bearers of the Good News, emphasizing Luke's point that that Jesus came for all people. Though we tend to get all sorts of soft fuzzies when we think of shepherds, they were despised in first century society. Shepherds were ceremonially unclean and seen as lazy parasites, letting their sheep feed on other's land. All this had the same effect on these people as it ought to have on us. Mary treasures these words and ponders them. The shepherds then return to their fields and sheep, all the time praising and glorifying God. They may have been only shepherds, but they understood what had happened.

Getting these studies on-line & early!

These studies are available at least a week before the sermon is preached. If you would like to get them early, you can get them on-line. There are two ways:

1. You can download a copy at the new website for the St. Andrew Center for Christian Learning by going to www.standrewcccl.org. Simply click on the button, Sermon Background Studies, and you'll be taken to the right page.
2. The studies are also distributed by e-mail. To join the e-mail distribution list, simply send an e-mail to: sa_studies-subscribe@yahoogroups.com.

You can find more info at the Center's website.

The Center's website also has information on the Bible Academy session that begins Jan 13. You can download the registration booklet and even register on-line. You'll also find materials for a number of the classes offered by the Academy, as well as recommended links for Bible study and even book recommendations!

Why December 25?²

From its earliest days, the Christian church celebrated Jesus' last days and resurrection at Easter. However, it was several centuries before 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 an explanation for December 25 that makes more sense.

Early Christians believed that Jesus was conceived and crucified on the same date. One early Christian, Tertullian, writing about 200AD, calculated that the day of Jesus' death recorded in the Gospels was March 25 on the Roman solar calendar. 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 later!

¹ In the original Greek, the word conveys astonishment at the miraculous.

² There is an excellent article on this by Andre McGowan in the December 2002 issue of *Bible Review*. You can read it on-line at www.biblereview.org.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 Luke 1:57-80 The birth of John the Baptist</p>	<p>Day 2 Micah 5:2-5a & Matthew 2:1-6 The Messiah is to come from Bethlehem</p>
<p>Day 3 Isaiah 9:2-7 A new age and a new ruler</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 1 The genealogy demonstrates that Jesus comes from the House of David</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 2:21-40 The presentation of the infant Jesus at the temple</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. In his commentary on *Luke*, Alan Culpepper reminds us that the story invites us all to Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem by just going about the everyday business of life. In Matthew, the wise men come to Bethlehem through their learning. The shepherds arrive via divine revelation. How will you come to Bethlehem?
2. There is scandal in the Christmas story. God came to earth as a helpless baby, born in the poorest of circumstances, to two inconsequential parents, in a place that could have hardly mattered less in the Roman Empire. Is it really so hard to understand why so many people don't believe this happened? But the Christmas story is no fairy tale. By entering history in this way, God clearly identified himself with the poor, oppressed, marginal, ordinary, and powerless. At St. Andrew, most of us are neither poor nor oppressed nor powerless. How can we go about finding the humility to meet our humble Lord?
3. After the announcement to Mary that she is to conceive, she sings to God a hymn of praise (Luke 1:46-55). Jot down three images of God that you hold close to your heart. Then, read Mary's Magnificat and compare her images to yours. How are they similar? How do they differ?