

Christ Is Born

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Last in a four-part series

December 24, 2023

©2023 Scott L. Engle

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.

Glory to God, the Christ is born!

I can hardly imagine Mary’s sense of anticipation. The visit by the angel Gabriel nine months before would have been vividly burned into Mary’s memory. “You will conceive and give birth a son,” Gabriel had told her. “You are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High . . . the Son of God” (Luke 1:31, 35). For nine months, she had guarded her baby and her knowledge of whom she carried. Then, just when it is nearly time for her to give birth, she and Joseph must make the long trek to Bethlehem¹ for the census.

Mary and Joseph’s hometown was Nazareth, a small village located in the Galilean hill country, almost due west of where the Sea of Galilee empties into the Jordan River. Don’t picture the Galilean “hill country” like the Austin “hill country.” The hills between Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee are much more numerous, very steep, and incredibly rocky.

Bethlehem is located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem and about a 75 mile journey from Nazareth, depending upon the route taken. Regardless of whether Mary and

¹Joseph had to go to Bethlehem because he was a descendent of King David. Thus, Bethlehem was his ancestral home. Israel’s Messiah was to come from the house of David. The claim that Jesus was of David’s “house” was based on Joseph being Jesus’ legal, though not biological, father (see Luke’s genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3). You’ll also see that Luke takes Jesus’ genealogy all the way back to Adam, emphasizing that Jesus is savior all humankind, not just of the Jews.

Joseph went due south from Nazareth through the hills to Jerusalem and Bethlehem or went east for a bit so they could come south through the Jordan River valley, it would have been a very difficult trip for Mary. I'm quite sure that by the time they reached Bethlehem she was very much ready to have the baby.

But, of course, the end of Mary's pregnancy meant the beginning of the most remarkable time in human history, the 33 years or so that God walked the earth. It can be a hard thing to accept that the climax of human history was 2,000 years ago, but that's the truth of it. And each year we gather to worship our Lord and celebrate the beginning of those 33 years.

The Proclamation

In v. 10, the angel of the Lord says, "I bring you good news of great joy for all the people!" 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 Augustus Caesar. It is Jesus who will bring "peace on earth," not Augustus. Even shepherds would have realized the boldness of the angel's message!

The end or the beginning?

Christians have never been able to do a very good job at *Christianizing* Christmas. In the early centuries of Christianity, Christians didn't try 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 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.²

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 flesh. We worship the God who is revealed to us in that tiny, slimey, 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

²From Wood's review in *Christian Century* of Bruce Forbes' new book, *Christmas, A Candid History*.

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.

Some reflections

1. 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.
2. I am always drawn to two questions by Luke’s story. *First*, who or what is really Lord of my life? 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 my notions of power and importance. How will I reflect this reversal in my own life?

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.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Afternoon Class

Current study: *Numbers*

This class will not meet Dec 25 and Jan 1

Meeting on-line at 3pm Monday on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

Beginning January 9: The book of Acts

This class will not meet Dec 26 and Jan 2

Meeting at 12:00 noon Tuesday in person in Piro Hall and on-line on Scott's Facebook ministry page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC".

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Both classes are recorded and are available each week in my podcast at scottengle.podbean.com. They are also available on Apple podcasts and elsewhere. Search by "Scott Engle Bible Studies".

Scott's Sunday Class

This class will not meet Dec 24 & 31

Meeting on Sunday at 11:00 in Smith Worship Center and on Scott's Facebook page. Search for "Scott Engle - St. Andrew UMC."

Videos of all three classes are posted on Scott's YouTube channel. Search for "Scott Engle." These videos are posted as soon as possible after class.