

The Birth of Jesus

The people called Israel needed good news. Other than the privileged upper class who maintained a



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tenuous peace with the Roman authorities and controlled social and religious establishments, the vast majority struggled to live adequately and hold on to the promise that God would send the Messiah.

Part of their cultural dream was that Messiah would crush the despised Romans and reestablish the throne of David.

Luke understood all of this as a non-Jew who had come to faith in Christ; in that epiphany of faith he realized the unique ways God revealed his grace and the ordinary people God used to communicate his love. Consider the improbable people God used to introduce Jesus to our world.

The Emperor Augustus, portrayed in Roman society as a kind of demigod, declared a census across the provinces. After all, they needed to know population concentrations and update their tax projections. Luke views this remarkable story as improbable and wonder-filled. So he lays the foundation: Joseph takes his pregnant wife to Bethlehem for the census because that is their ancestral home. Roman law was not to be ignored, so the couple made the difficult journey south with many other descendants of King David. Roman law could be very dangerous, and we suspect Joseph did not want to do anything that might result in tragedy for his wife and expected child.

Luke didn't detail the actual birth, announcing simply: "Mary 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" (v. 7). The word for "inn" in this text can actually mean "a room in a house." Barns (as we know them) did not exist, but families often

brought their animals into the house at night for safety and warmth, often in a restricted space or beneath the area where they slept. Bethlehem was only a village, swollen with hundreds of census travelers, and it is most likely that Joseph and Mary were afforded a quieter area away from prying eyes in case "her time should come."

No matter how hard you try to make that situation comfortable, normal, or appropriate, the fact is God was not going to do anything in the expected way! Nothing about the Jesus story, in fact nothing about God's grace, can be forced into the limited timetable, expectations, or religious ideas of humankind!

Bring on the shepherds from the grazing fields around Bethlehem. What a curious audience is given the gift of being the first voices to announce that God's Savior has been born in a quiet little village the world does not know about! Those shepherds supplied the lambs for sacrifice in the Jerusalem temple. Consider that Jesus became known as "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). Those shepherds were looked upon as dishonest, dirty, and unworthy to have any contact with the priests or scholars of law! Yet those shepherds were the first to hear the gospel – not the high priest, not those who officiated at the altar of sacrifice, not those who managed the temple and its scholarly programs. The pattern of all four gospel narratives reveals God in Christ caring for the imperfect, the afflicted, the outcasts as Christ modeled and taught the love and grace of God.

The shepherds were terrified when God's angel appeared and announced: "Do not be afraid ... pay attention ... I bring you the greatest good news that promises hope and joy for all the world ... for this day in David's city, the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord has been born" (vv. 10-11). The title "savior" was commonly a reference in the Roman Empire as a title for

the emperor, so Luke is telling his readers that this Jesus will cast aside the political power structures of this world and offer new life to both Jew and Gentile.

"Suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God ... Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" (v. 14). The shepherds then become the witnesses and heralds that Messiah has come, "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (v. 20). There is a small, but not unimportant similarity here. David was a shepherd before God chose him to be Israel's first king. I find the Holy Spirit to be very much at work in this circumstance, this "improbable" event.

Like the people of that time, we anticipate that spiritual leaders, pastors, theologians, biblical scholars will interpret the Bible and God's will for us. In my fifty plus years as a pastor I discovered that lay people, teenagers, Sunday School teachers, and even a church janitor could have more opportunities to share Christ one-on-one more than me. People outside the church often put their guard up when a preacher appears, but someone who shares their personal world has a natural opening. I have wonderful memories of helping people open their heart to Christ, but there are equally wonderful memories of people who came to me because their grandmother, Bible teacher, classmate, or friend shared how deeply God loved them.

This Advent season, join the shepherds in sharing God's love. Obviously the greatest gift cannot be wrapped and placed under a Christmas tree. Perhaps if we see ourselves to be more like the shepherds on that wondrous night, and less like respectable people who fit social expectations, we would be more comfortable telling our world the Savior has come!