

## Sermon Notes

**God's Light Invades the Darkness**Luke 2:1-20; Jerry Truex; December 24, 2011

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**A. Introduction**

The theme of Christmas Eve is revelation and incarnation. God reveals him/herself by coming to human beings in the form of a baby and by being light in a world of darkness. In this way, darkness and light are also themes of Christmas Eve. The coming of Light is a movement of the Spirit in and through and among human beings. In this way, Christmas Eve is not a date, but a state of mind and heart.<sup>1</sup>

The problem is our minds and hearts may have become dull. By the time we reach Christmas Eve, the Christmas story and Christmas carols have become too familiar, and their meaning, muffled and muted. During this season, our culture also pushes us to spend more than we should and operate at a phrenic pace. As a result, Christmas as a frame of mind may elude us.

So, if you think the Christmas as a frame of mind eludes you, I have good news for you.

**B. The Birth of Jesus: Luke 2:1-20**

**Mary and Joseph go to Bethlehem.** 2:1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2:2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 2:3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 2:4 Joseph 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. 2:5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

**Birth.** 2:6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 2:7 And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger [Gk. phatnē = feeding-trough], because there was no place for them in the inn [Gk. kataluma = guest room].

**Angels Appear to Shepherds.** 2:8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 2:9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

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<sup>1</sup> "Christmas is not a date. It is a state of mind." - Mary Ellen Chase (*New York Times*). "Christmas isn't just a day; it's a frame of mind." - Valentine Davies (*Miracle on 34th Street*).

2:10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 2:11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 2:12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 2:13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 2:14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

**Shepherds go the Bethlehem.** 2:15 When 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." 2:16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger [Gk. phatnē = feeding-trough]. 2:17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 2:18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 2:19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 2:20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (NRSV)

For many people, the Christmas story has a once-upon-a-time, fairy tale quality. It's read alongside *The Night before Christmas*,<sup>2</sup> the story of Santa Clause, and mixed with grandiose announcements about peace on earth and goodwill toward all.

The question is: Does the story of Jesus' birth offer a fairytale hope? Or does it offer real hope ... life-changing hope ... world-transforming hope?

## C. First Episode: Darkness and Suffering (2:1-7)

### 1. Darkness

The story begins by explaining it was dark times for Mary and Joseph. Emperor Augustus had order a census to be taken. In the Roman Empire, censuses were taken for the purpose of assessing taxes. The census was a harsh, repressive, and imperial act. It was not good news for Mary and Joseph.

### 2. Stress

The story tells that it was a stressful time for Mary and Joseph for three reasons.

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<sup>2</sup> Written by Clement Clarke Moore in 1823. "Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house Not a creature was stirring, not even a mouse; The stockings were hung by the chimney with care, In hopes that St. Nicholas soon would be there ...."

To begin with they were poor Jewish peasants from Nazareth. Both Jesus and Joseph are identified as *tektons*, people who worked with their hands, stone workers or carpenters. This meant the family had already lost their small family plot of land. They were landless, one step below peasant class. They subsisted from day to day. Now they were going to be heavily taxed.

Second, Mary was about 14 years old and pregnant without being married. She was betrothed to Joseph, but they were not married. Undoubtedly Mary was perceived to be harlot, because I'm sure most people in Nazareth did not believe her story of virgin conception. She had to endure a derision, shame, and misunderstanding.

Third, Mary and Joseph were forced to journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, about 85 miles. Walking 85 miles while pregnant was not a weekend at the beach.

### **3. No space in the *kataluma* (guest room)**

Since Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home, he probably had many relatives living there. If he had relatives living in Bethlehem, it would have been unthinkable for Joseph and Mary to seek a public inn, especially when we consider Mary was pregnant. Surely, Mary and Joseph stayed with relatives and did not seek a public inn.

When the passage says there was no room in the *kataluma*, which could refer to a *public inn* or a *guest room*. However, scholars believe that *kataluma* refers to an upper guest room built on top of the one room house. This means there was no space in the upper guest room in one of Joseph's relative's homes.<sup>3</sup> It also means there was "evil innkeeper" that turned Mary and Joseph away.

A peasant home typically had two rooms on upper level and the animals on the lower level.<sup>4</sup> Animals were usually brought into the lower level of rural, small homes at night for safety, and in the winter, to provide warmth.

The text says there was no room or space in *kataluma*; the guest room was full. There were so many relatives there, Mary and Joseph had to stay where the animals were.

After Jesus was born, they put him in a *phat-nē* (manger), which is really a feeding or water trough. The *phat-nē* (manger) was usually carved from stone and measured three to four feet in length; just the right size for a baby.

### **D. Second Episode: Light and Hope (2:8-20)**

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<sup>3</sup> The word *kataluma* is used three times in the NT. In addition to Luke 2, it is used twice to refer to the upper room where Jesus and his disciples ate the Last Supper (Luke 22:1; Mark 14:14).

<sup>4</sup> For details on Jewish peasant homes, see Bailey, *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes*, 28-34.

The second episode of the story begins by saying it was “night”. “When we hear it is night (v. 8), all we can do is shake our heads in agreement.”<sup>5</sup> There is heavy darkness for Mary and Joseph.

Then we are whisked away to the sheep fields and their shepherds. Shepherds were at the lower end of the social spectrum. They were considered shiftless and untrustworthy.

What is remarkable is that the story hangs on the shepherds’ testimony. An angel of the Lord appears to them in radiant heavenly glory (v. 9) and announces good news: “To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.... a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

The shepherds seem compelled to go Bethlehem to tell the parents about the revelation they received about their child: he is the savior, messiah, and lord. In other words, their child is the light that shatters the darkness and the peace that relieves all stress and weariness.

Notice Mary’s response. She ponders all their words in her heart.<sup>6</sup>

### **E. Pondering the Story**

In Luke’s infancy narratives, Mary is presented as the ideal believer and she ponders the shepherds’ revelation.

It suggests that we ponder the story. We are to meditate on it. We are to cull from it God’s personal message to us. What is God revealing to you through this story?

In pondering the story for ourselves, we are to embrace Christmas as a state of mind. As a state of mind, there are two things that stand out to me.

First, the Christmas story is paradoxical because Jesus—the Savior, the Messiah and Lord—comes to us in and through peasant parents and through very humble circumstances. God appears in the most unlikely places—to a young, Jewish peasant girl living under the shadow of pregnancy without a husband to shepherds, who were considered to be the dregs of society. In this way, the story tells us that God affirms that the poor, the misunderstood, the humble, and those who know they need a savior and lord.

The paradoxical nature of the story invites me to see God revealing His/Herself through human beings, especially the poor and humble.

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<sup>5</sup> Darrik Acre, “Jesus, Our Hope,” <http://www.nazarenepreacher.org/articles/36-sermons/266-christmas-day>

<sup>6</sup> “A mental process is clearly intended here.” Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Gospel of Luke, Sacra Pagina* (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1991) 51.

Second, the Christmas story is also highly symbolic. The story is shrouded in darkness. There are:

- the oppressive Romans;
- the uncertainty of pregnancy;
- the long arduous journey;
- the crowded living conditions;
- the sharing of space with lowly animals.

But in this darkness, the Lord of Glory/Light invades human experience. God invades the womb of an insignificant peasant girl in the form of a fragile infant. God calls the most insignificant and even the most disrespected to carry, birth, and announce the Word of God (v. 29).

The symbolic nature of the story invites me to look for God at work even in the dark times of my life. In the midst of darkness and stress, God's glory and salvation may already be at hand.

The story invites us to look for God in and through the ordinary and familiar events of life, even and especially in the poor and marginalized people of our world. In this way, Christmas Eve is not a date, but a state of mind and heart. It is a state of mind and heart which says, "God is here."