



## **Luke 2:1-21**

**“Finding Your Place”**  
(5<sup>th</sup> in a series on Luke’s Gospel)

December 24, 2012 (Christmas Eve)

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**“Following Christ From City Center!”**

LUKE 2:1-21 "FINDING YOUR PLACE"

Red = Echoes Of Roman Imperial Theology

1) vv.1-7 GEOPOLITICAL EVENTS: SIGN OF BIRTH FULFILLED (See prophecy of 1:30-31).

1 **IN THOSE DAYS** a decree went out from Caesar *Augustus* *Augustus* d. 14AD, (Gk. *Sebastos* = one worshiped)  
 that **all the world** should be enrolled./ **Control! Oikoumene (Roman coins), Census//1:5, Taxes, Enrolled (4x)**  
 2 This was the enrollment before Quirinius was governor of Syria.// **(Garland: 118), Augustus (44/42 B.C.-A.D. 14)**  
 3 a And **all** went to be enrolled, each to his own city. **Year-long, Acts 5:37 for hostile response, Psalm 87:6**  
 4 b And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, **1:27,32,69,2:11**  
 b' which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David,/ **Fulfills Micah 5:2 (Place/Lineage)**  
 5 a' to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. **80-85 Miles, Comply With Law**  
**Uprooted, Note 6 Uses Of All (vv. 1, 3, 9, 18, 19, 20)**  
 6 And *while they were there*, the time came for her to be delivered. **No Late-Night, No Innkeeper**  
 7 And she gave birth to her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, **Strips, 2:22-24, 23:53, Wisd. Sol. 7:4**  
 and laid him in a manger (i.e. feeding trough), **9:58, Odd, Lower Of 2-Level House, Isaiah 1:3(LXX), //13:15**  
 because there was no room (space, *topos*) for them in the inn/guest quarters . **Gk. *kataluma* = Above Home, //22:11**  
**House Filled With Higher Status Family**

2) vv.8-20 SHEPHERDS' TREK AND ANGELS' CHORUS. **Source Of Much Great Art Angelophanies //1:5-25, 26-38**

a) v.8 Shepherds In The Field. **Dishonest/Outside Law (b. *Sanhedrin* 25b), Friend Of Sinners**  
 8 And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, **4:18-19, Marginalized**  
 keeping (the) watches over their flocks by night. **Association With David As Shepherd**  
**Humble Birth, Glorious Announcement!**

b) vv.9-11 Angelic Message To Shepherds (Emperor Language: Birthday/Benefits).

9 And the angel of the Lord appeared to them,  
 and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, **Not In Jerusalem But Here! 1:78**  
 and they were filled with fear. (10) And the angel said to them, **Isaiah 6:1-5 For Fear**  
*"Do not be afraid,* **1:13, 30, 1:32-33 (v.11)**  
*for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people;* **//2:30-32**  
 11 *for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, Christ the Lord."* **1:32-33, 47; 3 Titles, Is. 9:6**  
**Emperor's Birthday: Below (9 B.C.)**

c) v.12 Manger Sign Given By Angel. **Invitation To Action, Adventure**  
 12 *And this will be a sign for you:* **Prophecy/Fulfillment**  
*you will find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.* **Bringer Of Peace, Not Augustus**

d) vv.13-14 Angels Sing The Meaning/Future Of Salvation.

13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly **host (army),**  
 14 praising God and saying (singing), **Angels Sing Of Present & Future**  
 1 *"Glory to God* **(Benefit No. 1) //19:38**  
 2 *in the highest,* **Cosmic Glory & Peace From God**  
 2' *and on earth* **Peace = Shalom, Eirene (4 Dimensions)**  
 1' *peace among men (those) with whom he is pleased."* **(Benefit No. 2) Zech. 1:79**  
**(Anthropois eudokias = "men of favor"), 3:22, 12:32, Acts 10:36**

c') vv.15-16 Manger Sign Confirmed By Obedient Following. **Fulfillment**

15 When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another,  
*"Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing which has happened (accomplished word),*  
 16 *which the Lord has made known to us."* **God Keeps His Word**  
 And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. **The Angels Are Truth-Tellers**

b') vv.17-19 Angelic Message Shared By Shepherds. **Model Evangelists**

17 And when they saw it they made known the saying which had been told them concerning the child;  
 18 And **all** who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. **Testimony, Worship**  
 19 But Mary kept **all** these things (words), pondering them in her heart. **//1:66, 2:51b (Reflective)**  
**Full Significance Not Yet Clear, Mary As Thinker**

a') v.20 Shepherds In The Field. **Model Worshipers**

20 And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for **all** they had heard and seen, **Acts 4:20**  
 as it had been told them. **Revelation, Spiritual Afterglow! Sinners As Evangelists!**  
**Most Christmas Readings Stop Wrongly At v.20, Miss Covenant Ceremony**

1') v.21 JEWISH INITIATION: SIGN OF NAMING FULFILLED (See prophecy of 1:30-31).

21 **AT THE END OF EIGHT DAYS**, when he was circumcised, he was called *Jesus*, **Obey: Gen. 17:11-12, Lev. 12:3**  
 the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb. **1:26-38, Inducted Into Covenant, Parent's Faith**

## I. LUKE AND THE PERVASIVE ROMAN IMPERIAL THEOLOGY AND PROPAGANDA.

**Prience Inscription, Augustus Caesar As World Savior, 9 B.C., Birthday Inscription:** “Providence... has brought into the world Augustus and filled him with a hero’s soul for the benefit of mankind. A Savior for us and our descendants, he will make wars cease and order all things well. The epiphany of Caesar has brought to fulfillment past hopes and dreams.”

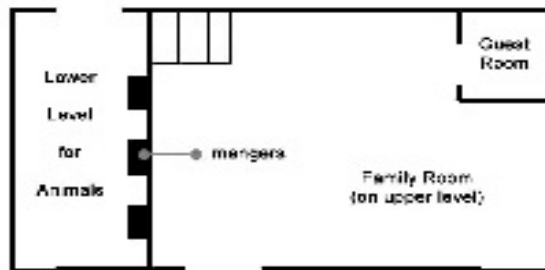
**Myra Inscription:** to the “divine Augustus Caesar, son of a god, imperator of land and sea, the benefactor and savior of the whole world.”

Thus, there is proclaimed on the birthday of Caesar (in these and other inscriptions) the he fulfills ancient hopes, is the focus of divine Providence, is son of God, as *Augustus* is worthy of worship, is titled *Savior*, has an epiphany or manifestation, and brings peace to all the world as the benefactor of all. His birthday (Sept. 23) was later made the beginning of the new year. Luke believes that such claims about Augustus are idolatrous, but in Jesus they are true. Each claims to bring a “gospel of about the creation of a peaceful world.” Their means of doing it are not the same. One is through violence and victory, the other through justice and the inbreaking power of God’s kingdom. Jesus gave non-violent resistance. They are rival political and religious claims, then and now. Hitler is not Feuhrer (leader); Jesus is!

## II. LUKE AND THE REALITIES OF JEWISH VILLAGES AND CLANS.

<u>Christmas Myths</u>	<u>Luke’s Presentation From First-Century Middle Eastern Culture</u>
1. Lonely journey	Crowded roads, everyone on the move to ancestral towns for census
2. Travel by donkey	Don’t know, likely on foot
3. Late arrival in labor	“And while they were there” implies a more extended stay before labor
4. Family as strangers	Joseph’s ancestral home, many kin, “I am Joseph son of Heli, grandson of Matthat, of the family of David;” hospitality is highly valued in that culture
5. Mean innkeeper	In house of family member, but not in guest “upper” room ( <i>kataluma</i> , 22:11)
6. Joseph delivers	Village midwife delivers, as was customary in Jewish villages
7. Rejected at birth	Welcomed at birth, rejected later at death
8. Manger as wooden cradle	Manger as place cut out in a stone wall at feeding height for sheep, a niche
9. Born in a cave	Lower level of village house. The guest room was normally on the roof.

Lower level = animals at night  
Upper level = family space  
Roof = Guest Room (*kataluma*)



Reading the text on the basis of Middle Eastern culture, the story falls into place: Joseph and Mary went to the house of relatives. When the time came for the birth, Mary delivered her firstborn and laid him in the trough. In case anyone should ask why these guests were not in the guest room, Luke says, ‘because there was no room in the guest room.’ Jesus is born, not in a palace, not in his family’s own home, not even in the guest room of his relatives’ home, but in the common room of a peasant home in a small town in an out-of-the way corner of the world. Such homes were designed so that the ground floor area just inside the door was used as a place to keep livestock at night. The people in the house lived in an adjacent single room, built a few feet higher. The people would keep it clean by sweeping everything down into the “stable,” and the animals could be easily fed by cutting niches into the edge of the platform that constituted the people’s living space. These niches were the mangers. Mary and Joseph traveled to Bethlehem weeks or days before Jesus’ birth, stayed with relatives, moved down into the stable portion of the house for the delivery, because the guest room (the “inn”) was occupied- probably by other relatives. The angels revealed the birth to shepherds before anyone else, for the very reason that shepherds were a socially disreputable group, like those the grown-up Jesus would spend much of his time with. Joseph probably took Mary to Bethlehem not because she needed to be physically present for the census, but because she could have been harmed or killed by fellow Nazarenes incensed by her premature pregnancy (Adapted from Kenneth E. Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: The Cultural Background of Luke 2:7,” *Evangelical Review of Theology*, 4:2:1980).

## A Brief Treatment Of Luke 2:1-21

Luke's *Christmas story*, when v.21 is added, stands in parallel to John the Baptist's birth in 1:57-80. Their conceptions, through different, are parallel (1:5-25// 1:26-38), as are their births and early ministries (3:1-22 // 3:23-4:15). Jesus does not just appear; his is a highly prepared arrival.

The surface structure of 2:1-21 is a 9:1 concentric pattern with vv.13-14, the song of the angels, at the center (1, 2<sub>a</sub>-b-c-**d**-c'-b'-a', 1'). The outer components 1 (vv.1-7) // 1' (v.21) each contain a major dating, the first about geopolitical events, the second about Jesus' initiation as a Jewish male through circumcision and entry into the covenant of Abraham. In both cases prophecy is fulfilled: he is a son born as a Davidid, and he is called Jesus, the name given to Mary by Gabriel (1:30-31). The central section (2:8-20) is yet a third angelophany (1:5-25, 1:26-38), this time offering revelation to a band of local *unlikelies* (i.e. shepherds) to demonstrate, as later in the gospel, that Jesus is indeed *the friend of sinners*.

A pattern emerges. Gabriel comes and goes on divine errands; Zechariah goes on pilgrimage to the temple and back; Mary goes on a pilgrimage to the Judean hill country and back; the holy family goes on pilgrimage to Bethlehem and back, and now the shepherds go on a pilgrimage to Jesus' birthplace, then back to work. To be caught up in the work of God, travel is required! Except for trips to the Holy Land *to walk where Jesus walked*, Protestants have largely abandoned pilgrimage as a spiritual discipline, but Scripture- and particularly the birth narratives- are full of such. A pilgrimage is a break from routine that puts one in a liminal state, enabling a fresh openness to of God along the way. About every two years I need to leave the U.S. to have my soul *de-toxed* in a mission trip. I go in hope, and come back with a new set of eyes. Away from the props and securities of life, I am forced to stay alert to the approaches of God.

Luke delights to paint the story of Jesus' arrival against the backdrop of the world's great pyramid of power. Caesar proposes, but God disposes. The world's true ruler is moved around on a chess board and by providence lands in David's city for his birth. The holy family are not Jewish political resisters, but quietly obedient to the inconveniences of living as an occupied people. Jesus is political in a much larger more lasting sense. He is born among family, tended by village mid-wives. Jesus sleeps in a manger on the lower level of a family house because the room on the roof is full of older relatives. He was not rejected but welcomed at birth. Mean inn-keepers and late night arrivals are not part of the story.

Romantic notions of shepherds do not match first century reality. Think *sheep-rustlers* and *unauthorized-grazers* for an accurate picture. It was to working stiffs on the night watch that the Lord's angel appeared reflected in heaven's light. Someone later asks, "And what were you drinking that night?" The telegram from God is that the Messiah has been born close enough for them to find him if they look for the right sign, a wrapped baby in a feed trough. What is ultimately for *all people* starts with *some people*, and those are the shepherds. When the heavens open further, the sky is filled with more luminous creatures, all praising God and singing of the new union between God's glory and human welfare. It is to Jesus (3:22) and his followers (12:32) that the promises are made because it is among them and with him that the new arrangements are being practiced at ground level. The church is God's peace laboratory.

When heaven is zipped back shut, the shepherds first convene for a discussion, then go to confirm the sign. Do the sheep go with them? They eventually find the home, get the names of the family, and share what happened on the hillside. Apparently, God cannot keep a secret this good! The confirmation of prophecy is a cause for joy and reflection all around, with Mary portrayed as a deep thinker. On the eighth day Jesus spills his first blood. Whatever is ahead, one thing is clear: Jesus is a Jew.

## FINDING YOUR PLACE

*"Glory to God in the highest,  
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased."*

What glorifies God is good for earthlings.

L U K E 2 : 1 3 - 1 4

**W**ally was big for his age, which was seven. Everyone wondered what role Mrs. Edwards would give him in the Christmas play since he was a slow learner. To the surprise of all, he was chosen as innkeeper. His face flushed; he smiled with delight. It was only one line: "There is no room in the inn." Wally had it down in no time.

Then came the night. Parents took their places; every seat was filled. The children entered singing "Oh Come All Ye Faithful." Lights dimmed and the curtain opened. A round Mary and a worried Joseph entered from stage right and walked up to the inn. "Please sir, My wife.... Could we have a room for the night?"

Wally was ready. He began, "There is....," then started over again, "There is...." The line was gone, his mind blank. Everyone was embarrassed, none more than Wally. He didn't know what to say or do; he stood silent in the cardboard doorway like a great lump. Being a bright boy, Joseph thought he would improvise and turned towards the stable at stage left. Seeing the holy family walk away Wally was desperate, "Look," he announced in a clear voice waving his hand, "there's plenty of room at my house, just come on home with me."<sup>1</sup>

Mrs. Edwards got the Bethlehem architecture wrong; Wally got his lines wrong, but everyone went home knowing the innkeeper had the best line of all, because isn't that what God's after? That we will say to the Lord and his humble parents, "Look, there's plenty of room at my house, just come on home with me."

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<sup>1</sup> Rewritten from [www.esermon.com](http://www.esermon.com).

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**Luke 2:1-21 ..... 6**

We have grown so used to hearing the story we forget how offensive it is when closely examined. The current controversy over Christmas is good for us. Those who are protesting our symbols in the public square understand better than we do. Consider the deep moral and intellectual challenges of Luke's Christmas story:

- \* If you're an *atheist*, the story's offensive because it assumes God and attributes all that is to a personal Creator.
- \* If you're an *optimist* or one who believes in human progress, it's offensive because the story assumes every last person born save one is a corrupted sinner under the influence of evil and in need of rescue.
- \* If you're a strict *egalitarian*, the idea that God chose the Jews as a special people is offensive.
- \* If you're among the *intellectually uncommitted* it's offensive because the story claims to have universal significance as the truth about God.
- \* If you are *morally tolerant* to the point of indifference, the story's offensive because it claims to embody universal moral standards against which all will one day be judged.
- \* If you are a *materialist* who believes matter is all there is, you'll be offended by the claims of divine intervention, particularly virginal conceptions, armies of angels, and ultimately a bodily resurrection.
- \* And if you are a *nationalist* in the extreme and believe our nation to be the pinnacle of history, you'll be offended by the whole notion of the kingdom of God as a coming political reality. It's not hard to understand why people resist our stories, their public symbols and even deeper demands.

Jesus and the story associated with him is offensive. It is, after all, the in-your-face challenge of God to a world gone terribly wrong, and that challenge must not be minimized, certainly not by the church. Therefore every public symbol, every carol, every Scripture fragment, every cultural association with Christ and Christmas is

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**Luke 2:1-21** ..... 7

offensive because it is a direct challenge to the way the world thinks and the way it’s currently run. In this the politically-correct Scrooges and ACLU Grinchs are profoundly right, and we ought to listen respectfully even as we respectfully disagree.

Jesus is offensive, such a profound challenge he was strung up by a coalition of government and religious leaders who had quite enough of his foolishness, thank you. He was first wrapped in bands of cloth by his mother and years later by Joseph of Arimathea who laid him not in a manger but in a tomb. We who are Christians delight in the fact that we have a Jesus-haunted culture and take it as a sign of God’s grace and as a bridge to discussions of who Christ is and just why he matters for all.

**SOMETHING ABOUT POWER (vv.1-7)**

Every year there is displayed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York an eighteenth century painting of the nativity scene. It's traditional in every sense except one. Behind the cradle, in the far distance, you can see the ruins of Roman columns. The artist knew the meaning of the manger. The birth of God's new age means the death of man's old world.<sup>2</sup>

Luke the historian deliberately sets the Jesus story against the backdrop of secular events. What happens in a manger eventually rocks Rome itself. Caesar wants taxes; he pulls the strings of imperial power and the world jumps, verse 5: “In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the empire should be enrolled.” Inscriptions of Augustus’ birthday and the benefits he provided from the top down were carved in monuments all over the empire. One from 9 B.C. is named the *Priene Inscription* because of where it was found in Turkey. As I read it, note how much imperial rhetoric was taken up by Luke in his description of Jesus’ birth:

“Providence... has brought into the world Augustus and filled him with a hero’s soul for the benefit of mankind. A Savior for us and our descendants, he will make wars cease and order all things well. The epiphany of Caesar has brought to fulfillment past hopes and dreams.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Idem.

<sup>3</sup> F. Danker, *Jesus And The New Age* (St. Louis, MO: Clayton, 1972), 24.

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**Luke 2:1-21 ..... 8**

The kingdom this child embodies is not a sealed-off sphere of internal piety and individualized spiritual sweetness, a kingdom of the heart. It is a direct challenge to Rome and every empire across history. We are now an Empire here in America; this is our season in the sun- though we are beginning to creak and wobble, and this child is as much a challenge to us as to any of our predecessors. Jesus is a political challenge; he promises a kingdom and a new world where his word is the only law and his will the only way. “Thy kingdom come,” is a prayer for the end of every human government and the installation of a Triune theocracy, rule by the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. All human governments are temporary and preparatory because we were not designed to be ruled by one another but by God alone.

Caesar does not know the Invisible One who pulls strings so the Messiah can be born in the hometown of David and fulfill Scripture. Jesus will change the whole world. Six times in twenty-one verses Luke uses the word *all*: "all the world, all the people, all, all, all, all." What God is doing is for everyone. Luke has a strong doctrine of divine providence. Behind visible events the invisible God is at work bending events to divine ends.

So we hear the voice of the world's most powerful man read an edict in Latin and then command his staff to carry it out. We hear scores of quills scratching ink into papyrus before the imperial seal is impressed, the sound of hoof beats on cobblestones as couriers scatter along the various military highways that stretch like spider webs around the Mediterranean. A dusty official dismounts and greets officials in far-flung Syria with *Hail Caesar* and news from Rome.<sup>4</sup> A lesser functionary makes his way to Galilee where village by village notice is posted and penalties lined out for any who do not comply as a protest.

A young craftsman and his wife pack for the eighty-five mile journey south to Joseph's ancestral home. The sounds of hammer, saw and adz give way to the sounds of the road and nights under the stars or in some dangerous caravan stop. They are not the only ones headed to Bethlehem and neighboring villages outside Jerusalem.

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<sup>4</sup> I am aware of the difficulties of the dating and follow Luke's narrative logic. For a treatment of evidence upholding historical accuracy, see David Garland, *Luke* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2011), 117-119, contra Luke Johnson, *Luke* (Collegeville, MN: 1991), 49.

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**Luke 2:1-21 ..... 9**

They find a house full of people. The chatter of village women discussing Mary's first birth. Cousins and kinsmen, all from the house of King David. Mid-wives prepare because the time is soon. The birthing stool with the handles for gripping and pushing is brought in.<sup>5</sup> When I go back to Cheraw, I still know lots of people, though I've been gone forty years. I still know some in Saluda where my Father was born. Same with Joseph. It was a family reunion, not a lonely couple.<sup>6</sup>

Days pass. *And while they were there* notes Luke in verse 6, implying some duration, not a late night arrival as popular mythology depicts. Water breaks. Labor begins. No Demerol or Morphine. A rag to chew on. "Push Mary, push." She could die in this event; most women did by age thirty-five, worn out and depleted by the children who lived and the little ones they buried. The sweat and screams and blood of birth. Village women as midwives. "It's a boy! Blessed be the God of Israel," they announce. A wrinkled red baby stretching his lungs for the first time. Cord cut. Cleaned up. Nursed. Wrapped in bands of cloth and laid in a feeding trough cut into the wall because there was no space and no place for privacy in the guest room atop the flat-roofed village home. It was saved for older visitors of higher status, and they were young. Jesus was born in a barn, but this one was inside the home on the lower level where livestock were corralled at night.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> On birthing practices, see Elizabeth Johnson, *Truly Our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of the Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 276-277.

<sup>6</sup> On the remarkable work of Dr. Kenneth Bailey on this story, see his "Jesus Through Middle-Eastern Eyes," [worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/kenneth-e-bailey-on-jesus-through-middle-eastern-eyes](http://worship.calvin.edu/resources/resource-library/kenneth-e-bailey-on-jesus-through-middle-eastern-eyes); "The Manger And The Inn," [www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/11/08/The-Manger-and-the-Inn.aspx#Article](http://www.biblearchaeology.org/post/2008/11/08/The-Manger-and-the-Inn.aspx#Article).

<sup>7</sup> In a San Francisco Chronicle article, "Nazareth Village recreates life as Jesus knew it" (Dec. 23, 2005), Matthew Kalman writes, "Modern research shows the phrase 'no room at the inn' to be a simple linguistic mistake. 'There were no inns in the type of village which Bethlehem was in the first century,' said Claire Pfann, teacher at the University of the Holy Land, referring to the town where Jesus was born. 'The Greek word *kataluma*, or *eliya* in Aramaic --used to describe the Nativity scene in the Gospel of Luke --is always used to describe an upper room or guest room, which was typically found in the one or two patriarchal houses which would have been in such a village. Visitors would have stayed in these guest rooms, which would have been occupied

**Luke 2:1-21 ..... 10**

Some later imaginative stories that did not make it into the Bible were nervous about Luke's phrase *and she gave birth to her first born son* because it implied his birth was a physical and bloody as any other.<sup>8</sup> The imagined an effortless labor "with Jesus arriving as a ray of light or passing through Mary's womb the way the risen Christ passed marvelously through walls and locked doors."<sup>9</sup> Not so; that it was like every other birth did not make it less holy. The God who designed birth participated, cone head and all! Where, I ask, are those paintings? Cheezy, cone-head Jesus!

In far-away Rome Caesar impresses his will on the whole world, and here a baby boy sleeps in the straw with the pungent smell of bedded animals all around. God uses the powerful and visits the humble. Fantasies of late arrivals and mean innkeepers have much to do with our imaginations and nothing to do with Luke's story. Jesus was rejected at death, not at birth. Births in Jewish villages like Bethlehem are occasions of community joy. So was this one. It would be a while before Mary was fit enough to travel back home.

Eight days later Jesus was circumcised and inducted into the people who spring from Abraham's faith.<sup>10</sup> Born a Jew, initiated a Jew, lived and died a Jew, still a Jew in his risen flesh. It was a big Bethlehem reunion, all descended from Israel's great king, much gossip and news, older women coaching Miriam- her Aramaic name- in all motherly arts. Our imaginations need the discipline of careful research.

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because everyone had returned to Bethlehem for the census,' she said. 'Since they were full, the family had to share the stable under the house with the animals.'"

<sup>8</sup> *Protoevangelium of James*, 17-19. From this early Christian fiction comes the following: Joseph as an older widower, the late arrival, Jesus' birth in a cave, the midwife's surprise that Mary remains a virgin after Jesus' birth (Garland, *Luke*, 128). This legendary material eventually makes its way into Roman Catholic teaching on Mary and highlights the difference with Protestants over the proper foundations for teaching.

<sup>9</sup> *Idem*.

<sup>10</sup> For a vivid account of what it may have been like, see Bruce Chilton, *Rabbi Jesus: An Intimate Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 9-11. While I disagree with Chilton's take on the birth narrative, his understanding of the culture is expert.

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**THE ADVENTURE OF FAITH (vv.8-20)**

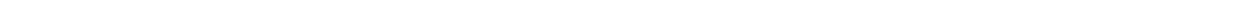
What happens next is a case study in how ordinary sinners become flaming evangelists. When angels appear, people flip out! The adrenaline of fight or flight sets in. Despite what you may have thought, first century shepherds were unsavory characters. They grazed herds on other peoples' lands and were known for thievery. Some later rabbis excluded their testimony from court. It was not because of their religious merits that the angel of the Lord (Gabriel, I presume) appeared. Again we see God working at the bottom and around the edges, because as we will later hear, Jesus is *the friend of sinners*.

Without warning the other world breaks in upon some third shift working stiffs. A luminous being calms their fears and preaches the gospel: good news of incredible joy for all people; the awaited one is here: a Messiah, a Savior, a Lord. You will spot him because he's wrapped like a mummy and sleeping in a trough, which when you think of it is a strange place for a baby even then, odd enough to be a sign. There was no lecture on their character or business practices and no call to repentance. Just an invitation to check it out. What the angel announces cannot be verified apart from personal searching! Divine revelation implies personal exploration. God teases and lures those he would draw to new life.

As a interlude between the message of the angel of the Lord and the pilgrimage of the shepherds, we have a mass angelic choir. And if my analysis is right, Luke placed this musical piece at the center of his concern, "Glory to God in the highest," the angels sing, "and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased."

First the vertical- *glory* to God, then the horizontal- *peace* to people on earth. The birth of the Messiah has won God glory and the praise of the heavenly host. It is also the place from which God's peace, not merely the absence of war but comprehensive wholeness, spreads. My professor Charles Talbert puts it this way:

"Since peace is God's gift, it reflects to God's credit that wholeness is being recovered among human beings.... *In other words what is good for human beings glorifies God; what glorifies God is good for human beings* (ital. ad.). Glorifying God and recovering human wholeness are not mutually exclusive: they are an indissoluble whole.... That is good



news of a great joy."<sup>11</sup>

God desires human wholeness at every level. With *ourselves* (proper self-love and worth), with *one another* (politics and family), and with all *the created world* (ecological harmony). But ultimately that hunger for wholeness will be frustrated unless it acknowledges the divine source. All the therapies and support groups in the world will not bring wholeness to one who lives in hardening unbelief. Life remains in pieces without a center that holds. This is the song of the angels. Want peace on earth? Then direct your life vertically so that all you do is a praise to God. Have a heart for God? Then work to spread his peace on every level of life, public and private. The angels are both charismatics in a praise meeting and social activists applying divine peace to social pain. We are not given the luxury of a choice. Praising God and meeting human need are not in opposition. What God has joined together, vertical praise and horizontal peace, the love of God and the love of neighbor, let no man or woman cut asunder.

Years ago I ran across a quote that stirred my soul. It sounded like a new verse of the ancient angels' song. See if you can guess the author:

“I have the audacity to believe that peoples everywhere can have three meals a day for their tired bodies, education and culture for their minds, and dignity, equality and freedom for their spirits. I believe that what the self-centered have torn down, the other-centered can build up. I still believe that one day all will bow before the altars of God and be crowned triumphant over war and bloodshed, and non-violent redemptive goodwill will proclaim the rule of the land.”

Some of you know the answer from the rhythms of the preacher's rhetoric. It was Dr. Martin Luther King, and the power of his words and vision came from the song of the angels. What brings God glory is good for all God's children. In every generation God raises up voices to sing his song and to do the hard work of tying language about God and love for people back together again.

So the shepherds strike out, verse 15: "Let *us* go over to Bethlehem and see this

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<sup>11</sup> Charles Talbert, *Luke* (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 34.

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thing which has happened, which the Lord has made known *to us*." Things were just as they had been told. A birth scene became a testimony meeting as they shared what happened on the hillside. The house was full of family; Luke notes that "*all* who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them." Shepherds testify; guests listen in awe; Mary quietly turned events over in her heart seeking insight. It was a revival meeting with God sending in strangers.

It is a tragedy and a lack of careful study that so many readings of Luke this night end with verse 20 when Luke clearly intended the story to end with verse 21 and Jesus' circumcision eight days after birth.

The Savior of the Gentiles- and that means all of us- is a Jew. The cut made in Jesus' flesh to mark him as a son of the covenant remains in his resurrection body along with the wounds of Good Friday. It is to the Jews that we owe a great debt. All the religious good and much of the moral good we have is from them: ethical monotheism, a God who speaks and rescues and makes demands, the Old and New Testaments since both are Jewish documents, the Ten Commandments, the Savior, his mother and father, our forms of worship, and the grand conviction that all history is headed towards a rude collision with the Kingdom of God and on the other side of that a healed world where God's rule of love is unchallenged. Christianity is a new Trinitarian spin on a Jewish spiritual reality, so beware of anything that makes Jesus less Jewish. I love the bumper sticker, "My boss is a Jewish carpenter."

**CONCLUSION**

I have about ten good stories in my repertoire, and tonight I tell you the best one. It was 1974, and I was a junior at Wake Forest. Those days were the height of *the Jesus movement*, and Jim Morgan and I were both zealous in our recovered faith. For that year's January term we toured Great Britain. First London, where late one afternoon we exited the tube at Kensington Station.

At the top of the steps we were approached by an old women who reeked of gin and smelled of weeks without soap and water. She wanted money, and tourists- she had learned as a beggar- were an easy mark. My stomach revolted at her smell. After a brief conversation we shoved her a few coins and left the station. About a block round the corner it hit us at the same time. We stared at each other. Two students

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head for the ministry had been less than kind to a poor old woman. We ran back to the station for a second try, but she was gone. We fasted the next day in repentance, and agreed that- should the Lord give us a second chance- we would show more love. We went on to Scotland by train, then to Ireland by ferry. It was a grand adventure.

The night before flying home we stayed with friends from Wake in a little hotel. Nineteenth century, all stone, narrow front steps, small vestibule, a second door into the lobby, TV room to the left, steep steps up to five floors of small rooms. It was cold and rainy, late January in London. We were all tired, sitting and laughing at a British comedy show, probably Benny Hill- some of whose lines I still use in unguarded moments away from the church. Just like week during a physical a nurse handed me a small plastic cup with instructions, "Could you please fill this?" and I replied, "From here?" She chuckled.

The door bell rang, really a buzzer. The Pakistani clerk was no where to be found. It rang again. I jumped up. Jim and Judy Haughee followed, Jim 6'2" to my left, me 5'6" six in the middle, Judy barely 4'10" to the right. Through the lobby, open the door, stand in the umbrella room, unlock the bolt, pull open the outside door.

Before us stood a couple, early 30's perhaps, and her about 10 months pregnant, a living example of *great with child*. From their appearance my guess was central Europe, perhaps Hungary. She wore a head scarf against the bitter weather; his hair matted by the rain. He looked up from the stoop and asked in an accented voice, "Are there any rooms in the hotel?"

A chill ran up my spine that had nothing to do with weather. I glanced up to Jim and down to Judy. I had to ask, and did, "What is your name?"

"My name is Yo-seph."

My heart melted. I looked up at Jim and down at Judy again. I took a risk. I had to know. Looking at his wife, I asked, "And what is your name?"

She glanced at Yo-seph who nodded, then answered, "My name is Mari-gold." Close enough for a redneck from South Carolina! There stood the holy family, and I was not about to find myself in some children's play as the mean innkeeper!

In a flash all three of us went to work, grabbing bags, ushering them out of the cold and wet into the warmth of the steam-heated lobby. Someone went and roused the desk manager, and when Jim and I explained we wanted to give our room to the couple and camp out in the TV room, he would have nothing of it. And when we told him the holy family had just showed up at his hotel, he shook his head, "Just two

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Europeans with no reservations. They have to go elsewhere.”

What happened next was one of happiest events of my life. Jim and I left Yoseph and Marigold with Judy. Into the rain and cold we ran without coats or gloves, up and down the streets till we found a hotel with a room and paid for it out of our pockets, then back to usher the holy family to their new digs. They did not understand why two crazy Americans were so giddy about helping strangers. But we did. “Lord,” we prayed a month earlier, “if you give us a second chance....”

I don’t remember sleeping that night. All I heard in my head were Christmas carols. For thirty-eight years now I’ve told the story, and tonight to you on my first Christmas in Greenwood. Problem is, once you’ve told your best, where do you go? Well, you trust God for more good stories yet to come.

Since that night I’ve wondered, The drunken lady, was she an angel unawares? I’ve also wondered if back in Hungary- or in some London flat- there’s a couple, now in their early seventies, who sometime around Christmas smile and say, “Remember the two crazy Americans, the short and the tall one? The thought we were the holy family! How daft!”

Seeing the holy family walk away, Wally was desperate, "Look," he announced in a clear voice waving his hand, "there's plenty of room at my house, just come on home with me."<sup>12</sup> So beware. You might get a visit, and you don’t want to blow it.

Merry Christmas!

Phil Thrailkill,  
Main Street UMC  
December 24, 2012

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<sup>12</sup> Illustration rewritten from [www.esermon.com](http://www.esermon.com).

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Study And Application Questions

2:1-7

1. Why does Luke introduce Jesus' birth with a report on world and local rulers?
2. Why is it important to Luke that the holy family comply and not resist?
3. How does God use imperial decrees to bring about Scripture's fulfillment?

2:8-20

4. How does it change the reading to know that shepherds were unsavory characters?
5. Read p.3 above for fresh understanding of the setting of Jesus birth? How does it differ from the sentimental mythology we have grown so used to?
6. Why does Luke use the word *all* so many times in his reports?
7. How are God's glory and human welfare linked in vv.13-14?
8. Go on the internet and find several pieces of art that portray vv.15-20.
9. Have you ever had news that was just too good to keep?

2:21

9. Why is the neglect of Jesus' Jewishness such a dangerous oversight?

A Prayer

The Lord be with you. **And also with you.** Let us pray:

**Send, O God, into the darkness of this troubled world,  
the light of your Son.**

**Let the star of hope touch the minds of all people  
with the bright beams of mercy and truth.**

**So direct our steps that we may ever walk in the way revealed to us,  
as the shepherds of Bethlehem walked with joy to the manger of Christ Jesus,  
who now reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God,  
now and forever. Amen.**

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