

CHRISTMAS EVE, 2020

Luke 2:1-7

The best we can do toward connecting with this story is to imagine how the Biblical characters are feeling, based on our own experiences. And right now I'm imagining Joseph is not happy about having to travel with his very pregnant wife just to take the census. The timing for this is terrible, and it multiplies their stress which was already high due to the scandalous nature of Mary's condition. And this is not a day trip by any means. From Nazareth to Bethlehem, as the crow flies, is about 70 miles. But walking - and choosing a less direct but safer and easier path - Joseph and Mary probably walked about 90 miles.

We've just taken the census in the United States. You may not even remember it, as it was highly overshadowed by the pandemic and all the other challenges of this year. But it was quite easy to complete; you could do it from home on your computer. The census in the story of Jesus' birth may seem like an odd detail to talk about. But if you think about it, when taking a census, you are revealing a lot about yourself: who you are, where you come from, who shares your household, even how much money you make. If anyone was trying to hide or

keep a low profile, answering the census puts an end to that. Taking the census, you stand up to be counted. You're signing on the dotted line. You're making a public admission, "this is me." For those who are different, this is dangerous and frightening.

And then Mary and Joseph find that there are no rooms available for them to stay. Put yourself in their place for a moment. Have you ever been turned away, rejected, or told that there was no room for you? Have you ever felt unwelcome, like you didn't belong? And if you're that person who's different - this is exactly what you're afraid of. At least farm animals don't judge. But making your bed among them is not nearly as cozy and friendly as it looks on Christmas cards.

Mary and Joseph are on a journey that is not of their own choosing. But there's no turning back now. Ask any woman who has given birth whether she wanted to quit pushing during delivery because it was just too hard and too painful. She can't entertain the thought for very long because her body reminds her, there's no turning back.

It can be a long and difficult journey - to finally be able to name and claim your identity. There is a lot of pain involved in birthing new life from the depths of your soul. But you are a part of God's story. God has named you and claimed you as well. Others may have rejected you, but God was born for you and died for you. He is on this journey with you, every step of the way.

Luke 2:8-14

Why shepherds? Why do angels come down from on high to announce a new king to these people who are the lowest of the low? Seriously, these are not what you'd call the "cream of the crop." Actually, since they're "living in the fields," it sounds like they may be homeless. It's a good thing they work with sheep, because they probably get along better with animals than with other people.

It's the middle of the night, so the angels may have caught them dozing. Waking up to the brilliant glory of the Lord shining in your eyes would certainly be startling, if not terrifying. The angel's message is surprising. Not the "do not be afraid" part. They say that to everyone. But that this "good news of great joy for all the people" comes to shepherds? Sounds a little backwards to me. Shouldn't that

kind of announcement come from the balcony of some royal palace looking down upon the commoners?

The birth of a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord is a heart-stopping, world-turning, life-changing event. But the marketing strategy is questionable. Instead of getting the word out to a large crowd, a critical mass of people, it starts with a few measly shepherds. It's like starting with the patients and medical professionals in the Intensive Care Unit. Starting with the people without heat or running water, who can't afford the kind of Christmas the world expects. Starting with children who remain in detention at the border, separated from their parents. They are the ones who need good news and great joy the most. The oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners, according to Isaiah, and later claimed by Jesus himself. Jesus is born for all people, of course, just not from the top down, but beginning with "the least of these."

Luke 2:15-20

The shepherds knew an important message when they heard one. They hurried to Bethlehem to see this baby who would be their Savior. But, again, while

he is descended from a royal line, he's not born in the lap of luxury. The shelter Mary and Joseph found was primitive, at best. Certainly not fit to be a home for humans. The newborn king has to sleep in a manger, an animal's feeding trough.

I learned something new this year about this passage - the whole birth narrative from the Gospel of Luke. One of the commentaries I read pointed out that the "manger" is mentioned three times. Seems like a lot for a small detail like that. But maybe it's not a small detail, after all.

Perhaps the manger is a metaphor, showing us in a very subtle way that Jesus comes to feed us. If we were celebrating the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, the manger would be a much stronger metaphor with a powerful message. Through communion we eat the bread, the body of Christ. We drink the wine, the blood of Christ. We take him in. We are fed, nurtured, strengthened. The baby lying in the feeding trough will become the Bread of Life and the Cup of Salvation. And he will invite us, "Those who come to me will never be hungry. Those who believe in me will never thirst."

After being visited by the shepherds, “Mary treasured all [their] words and pondered them in her heart.”

This year has been a long and difficult journey, to be sure. As we come to the end of it and prepare to enter a new year, there is much to ponder. For such a familiar story, the birth of Jesus can give us much to ponder, if we hear it with open ears, open minds, and open hearts. It can teach us things about ourselves, our neighbors, and that Jesus was born for all of us. Born that we might receive and give the gifts of hope, love, joy, and peace.

Glory to God in the highest, peace on earth, good will to humanity, whom God favors.

AMEN.