



*To Know Christ . . .
and to Make Him Known*

Wilmington, North Carolina
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**“What Child Is This?”
Luke 2:1-20**

What a picture! This time of year, especially when we hear the Christmas story as Luke tells about Jesus' birth, we get nostalgic and paint a sentimental picture of the Nativity in our hearts and minds.

You know what I mean—we picture a stable that's more like a small wooden barn or shelter our ancestors here in America would have known. Amazingly, though, everything is sweetness and light, despite the heartless innkeeper's refusal of a room to Joseph and Mary. We picture the animals all around them—sheep, cattle, camels, donkeys—looking lovingly on the Christ child, and maybe a gentle snow falling outside. The shepherds are gathered round, watching the child, and soon the wise men arrive, guided by the bright star that we see shining directly over the stable (in spite of the falling snow!). It makes a beautiful Christmas card, doesn't it?

But is that the way it really was? The fact is that we've read a lot into this scene. And we've sanitized it, idealized it, and romanticized it.

What's wrong with this picture?

There was most likely no snow, since it may well have been in late April or May that Jesus was born. (We don't know the exact date, but we do know that it most likely wasn't in December, since shepherds didn't stay out in the fields from November through March because of the sometimes raw winter weather. Even if Jesus had been born in December, the likelihood of snow is very limited; on average snow falls in Bethlehem only one day in December.¹ When the celebration of Christ's birth became widespread in the church early in the fourth century, the church chose December 25 for this great festival, providing a Christian alternative to the pagan festival related to the winter solstice that was celebrated about the same time in the Greco-Roman world. While the pagans celebrated the birth of the S-U-N, the Christians celebrated the birth of the S-O-N of God!

But Jesus was born in a stable, right?

Well, yes, but the stable wasn't a wooden barn like we usually think of, but rather probably a cave, a grotto. In fact, there's a complex of caves underneath the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. And in one of those grottos there's a beautiful 14-pointed silver star on the floor. It was put there to mark what was, according to a very ancient and fairly reliable tradition, the very place where Jesus was born. It's an incredibly moving experience to enter the Church of the Nativity through the Door of Humility, where you have to stoop down to enter, then to descend the stone steps into that cave and kneel near that star, as Jo Ann and I had the opportunity to do back in 2014.

Okay, but we know the innkeeper turned Mary and Joseph away because there were no rooms left, right?

Well, the fact is that ancient inns were nothing like our contemporary hotels or inns, and very little even like the inns or taverns of a couple of hundred years ago.² They usually consisted of an open courtyard around a water source, where the animals could be rested for the night, “loosed down” from their burdens (the root meaning of the Greek word Luke uses here is “a loosing down place”). Around the edge of this ground level courtyard were small stalls where poor travelers could spend the night. A simple staircase might have led up to a second floor, where the more affluent could obtain a small, rather spartan room for the night that would be off the ground and away from the animals. Even there, there was no luxury, and precious little, if any, privacy.

And as for the innkeeper, if there even was one, it’s very plausible, as New Testament scholars like Raymond E. Brown and Wayne Stacy propose, that he may actually have been trying to *help* Joseph and Mary have a more private place for the birth. If you read the text carefully, Mary and Joseph seem to have been in Bethlehem for a while already when the time came for the birth (***while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered***, 2:6).³ Luke never mentions an innkeeper. But that doesn’t keep the poor guy from getting a bad rap each and every December!

Since the shepherds were out in the field with their sheep, they wouldn’t be using those caves in the village that served as stables for their sheep during the winter. So there probably weren’t any sheep or goats there. While there may or may not have been other animals there—donkeys or camels or horses or cattle or such—the shepherds would *not* be there since their flocks would be out in the fields, and thus the cave was a much more private place for the baby to be born.

But now the wise men—no, don’t tell me the wise men weren’t at the manger!

Well, according to the Bible, they don’t show up until some time later, when Mary and Joseph have moved into *a house* in Bethlehem, maybe as much as eighteen months to two years later, judging by Herod’s order to slay all the baby boys two years old and younger.

Shepherds and angels

But as it turned out, the shepherds ended up being there, even though their sheep weren’t. The angel of the Lord had announced this child’s birth to them, and they were here to see Him! The angel told them that the sign of this good news that they would see would be a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger (the purpose of the swaddling a baby was not only to keep it warm, but also to keep its legs and arms straight, thinking that would help the limbs grow properly).⁴ Seeing a baby wrapped this way wouldn’t be that unusual, but seeing one in a manger? That would be!

And there He was, lying in a manger, a feeding box cut into the soft limestone, that had become a makeshift crib or cradle. But who was He? Why had angels announced His birth to them? In the words of the carol:

What child is this, who, laid to rest
On Mary’s lap is sleeping?
Whom angels greet with anthems sweet,
While shepherds watch are keeping?

Maybe Mary and Joseph were wondering the same thing! They knew He was special. Nothing was ordinary about His conception and birth; they had been surrounded by strange,

unusual circumstances.

You remember, don't you? The angel Gabriel had visited Mary to announce to her that she was favored by God, and would bear a son who would be great and would be called the Son of the Most High, and would reign forever on the throne of His father David. When Mary asked how this would be since she was a virgin, Gabriel said she would be overshadowed by **the power of the Highest**, so that her son would also **be called the Son of God**. What was more, he also told her that her older cousin Elizabeth, who was already past childbearing age and had none, was also carrying a baby.

Matthew, in his account of the Gospel, tells us that God was also dealing with Joseph during this time. When he had found out that Mary was expecting, he was trying to decide what to do. They were not yet fully married, but they were more than engaged. Betrothal usually lasted a year. It was legally binding, and could only be broken by divorce, yet the couple didn't enjoy the physical benefits of marriage until after the wedding. Since Mary was pregnant, and not by him, Joseph had a legal right to divorce her, and more. Had he been of such a mind, he could have brought charges against Mary, and if convicted, she could have been stoned to death. But Matthew tells us that Joseph was a just man and was unwilling to put Mary to shame. He had pretty much decided to divorce her quietly. But as he pondered what to do, God sent an angel to him as well, telling him not to fear taking Mary as his wife, since the child she was carrying was from the Holy Spirit, and that this child would save His people from their sins.

And now, of all the times for them to have had to travel, they had to go to Bethlehem on account of the Roman census. Since Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to the city of David, Bethlehem. For whatever reason or reasons, he chose to bring Mary with him. Sometime after they arrived, the baby was born—not in a house, but in dark, dirty, smelly cave.

With all these peculiar circumstances surrounding his birth, I guess that one more wouldn't make that much difference, would it? Or would it?

I mean, look at the birth announcement! God didn't send His angel to proclaim the birth of the Messiah to priests or rulers or Pharisees, but to a band of poor scraggly shepherds in a field watching their sheep.

Now understand that despite the fact that Israel's ancestors were traditionally shepherds, and that both Moses and King David had been shepherds, and that God often referred to Himself as a shepherd, and that the religious leaders were often called shepherds—never mind all that—shepherds were not highly regarded folk in the first century. They were dirty, they didn't smell good, and they were often regarded as religious outcasts, since their work prevented them from observing many of the religious duties of Judaism. They were sometimes considered rough and tough. Furthermore, they often had the reputation of being less than honest—and sometimes they deserved it.

Yet it was to these shepherds that God sent the angels to announce Jesus' birth. **"For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord!"** Could they even believe their ears? They'd just been told by an angel that the promised Son of David, the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord had been born—the one they were looking and longing for! Could it really be that this was who the baby in the manger was? Could King David's son, the Savior of Israel, be lying as a helpless little baby in a feed trough?

Seeing Jesus

Heather Elkins tells a story about serving one year at Christmas time as a volunteer chaplain at a maximum security prison. She thought a live Nativity might help the inmates get into the

Christmas spirit.

She couldn't take anything into the prison, so she had to use whatever was at hand. Frayed blankets became shepherds' cloaks. Drab sheets, white only long ago, draped the angels and a freshly smooth-shaven "Mary." It only took a little imagination for the prison yard to become the barren hills outside Bethlehem. And all the while, the guards were keeping watch over their "flock" from the walls and towers.

The only problem was, what would they use for the baby Jesus? What could they put in the cardboard box that was serving as a makeshift manger to represent the Christ Child? A bundled up towel? A homemade doll? They wanted something actually to *represent* Jesus—they wanted *to see Jesus* in the manger!

And so there, in the corner of a prison yard, surrounded by "scraggly shepherds . . . wrapped in their ragged reputations" and kings crowned with aluminum, with angels, shepherds, and wise men singing the sweetest of all Christmas carols, *Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me . . .*, "Mary" lifted up her child for all to see—a handmade crucifix!⁵

Maybe, in their imprisonment, being punished for their sins, those prisoners understood better than we what the age-old story they were acting out really means—that *Jesus is the promised Son of David, the Messiah King of Israel, our Lord and Savior*—that the baby in the manger would one day be the man on the cross, dying to save us from our sins!

"For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ, the Lord!"

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¹ <http://www.myweather2.com/City-Town/Israel/Bethlehem/ climate-profile.aspx>; accessed 12/15/2014.

² Wayne Stacy, *Where Jesus Walked* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2001), 101-106; also see A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Vol. II, *The Gospel According to Luke* (New York: Richard C. Smith, 1930), 23 and J. A. Thompson, "Inn," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. 2 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962), 703-704.

³ Scripture taken from the New King James Version.

⁴ Stacy, *Where Jesus Walked*, 117.

⁵ Wayne Stacy, *The Search: The Soul's Secret Signature* (Nashville: Fields Publishing, 2000), 33-34.