

## “Going Back to Bethlehem”

- Going Back to Bethlehem
  - Have you ever experienced that feeling of going back to a place that is very familiar to you after being gone for a while?
  - Perhaps you vacation to the same place every year or two, going back to your favorite hotel and restaurants
    - And even seeing some of the same people time after time
  - Maybe it's going back home
  - I feel a similar way when I visit the town in which I grew up
  - I have not lived in Malvern, Arkansas since I was 18 years old, but as you might know both Katy's and my family still live there
  - We are headed there tomorrow in fact, making our annual Christmas pilgrimage
  - You know how it is- when you go back to somewhere after having been away, there is always the mix of familiarity and the comfort it brings
  - And also the amount of change that occurred while you were away
  - It sticks out like a sore thumb
  - I'll never forget the day the old Sonic drive thru closed in my home town... and eventually was torn down.
  - Oh man, the memories of ordering a cherry limeade and cruising around town looking for friends and dates
  - I go back there now and it's a parking lot for a grocery store... but in my mind I still see that Sonic
    - Do you know what I mean?
  - Maybe tonight can be a little like that too
  - My hope is that as we gather this Christmas Eve, after having a very different Christmas last year,
  - Coming back to Bethlehem might feel a little like that experience of returning to a familiar place after a couple of years
  - Some things are different. We are different, perhaps something tonight will stick out as different than you remember it being
  - And some things will be familiar like going home for the holidays
  - And while we head back to Bethlehem, both historically and in our present moment tonight

- And if we go with our eyes and our heart open, we will find God there too- I know it. I believe it.
- For unto us this night a child is born, and he shall be called Emmanuel, that is: “God with us.”
- It is tempting for us, and indeed for the church throughout the centuries, to turn this birth story into sort of Hallmark Christmas movie
  - We love to romanticize it, to make it fit with our preconceived notions, focus on the impossibilities of it all, and to fill in the gaps as it suits us
  - We do that when we go home too, right? The memory of a place is often different from the place itself
  - But perhaps tonight we take a look at the Gospel of Luke and we try and see it for what it is
  - As we head back to Bethlehem, with Luke as our tour guide, we run into none other than Joseph, and a very pregnant Mary
  - But not the meek and mild Mary of church tradition, but a fire cracker who is ready to up-end the system of privilege of her day
  - Did you hear that reading on Sunday? The Magnificat?
  - This Mary is scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, lifting up the lowly
  - I once heard a preacher ask aloud, if you ever wondered where Jesus got his fiery preaching style from, it was his mother
  - Luke has them headed to Bethlehem for a registration, or census
  - It is here that I feel a little sympathy for the author of Luke, because his historical account of this moment does not receive a passing grade<sup>1</sup>
  - In his defense, he is writing 80 years after the event, without a library or internet to check his facts
  - But things do not line up.
  - We know that while Luke says Quirinus was governor, he was not, because we know he did not take over until 6 CE<sup>2</sup>
  - And that would mean that the census would not have happened the year Jesus was born
    - There is no record of any tax under Augustus
  - And Joseph would not have had to travel to his tribe’s hometown, because Rome didn’t care about that
  - However, Luke’s primary focus, instead of being historically accurate perfectly correct with the details of Rome’s history... <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.pulpitfiction.com/notes/christmaseve>

<sup>2</sup> New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Luke 2:1-20

<sup>3</sup> *Feasting on the Word* Year C Christmas Proper 1, Luke 2:1-20, Homiletical perspective

- Is being spiritually accurate
- Luke is more concerned with starting a new history, a new story of God's work in the world
- He is pulling from Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Micah for some of the details<sup>4</sup> which would have been what his audience expected
- In Luke's account, Mary and Joseph go back to Bethlehem, she is in labor, and the guest room of this house already has people in it
- And since most houses had only two rooms, one for guests, and one for the family and animals,
- Mary and Joseph likely stayed with the host family AND their animals
- This was not in a barn all by themselves, but rather without any privacy as Mary delivers her first born son with everyone there
- I imagine the midwife shooing the men outside into the cold to wait and to stay out of the way
- And Luke, almost certainly a man writing this account, records Mary going into labor and delivering the baby in a mere two sentences.
- From personal observation, it does not work like that... not for the fathers, and certainly not for the mothers
- And yet so much of Luke's account is absolutely accurate
  - God, the divine creator of the cosmos, comes in the flesh to these very young parents, who are far from home, vulnerable
  - This baby born not in the privilege and privacy of the palace, but with everyone wide awake from the commotion in a common living room
  - Without servants, but with animals wondering how they would eat now that the baby was lying in the food trough
  - While Luke's historical recollection was not the best, he got the important bits right.
  - Jesus comes in the opposite way than anyone would have chosen or predicted
  - The divine is eminently present in the most ordinary way
  - The greatest miracle infused into the most common of circumstances
  - Fully available to the whole of humanity regardless of how the world has sorted and valued you
  - To go even further with that message of grace to absolutely everyone
  - It is to the shepherds that the angels appear, and they too now begin their journey to Bethlehem

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<sup>4</sup> Interpretation Bible Commentary, Luke 2:1

- Shepherds were often considered shiftless and dishonest people who grazed their flocks on other people's lands<sup>5</sup>
- And yet it is to them the angels appeared and delivered their proclamation
- Even their message would have been an affront to the Roman rulers and elites
- The angels proclaimed Jesus as the Prince of Peace, Savior of the World, and the Son of God
- All titles that Cesar Augustus took for himself... now given by God to this baby born in Bethlehem
- Not in Rome, not even in Jerusalem, but Bethlehem
- Luke's message comes through loud and clear:
- On the one hand you can go to Rome, and on the other to Bethlehem
- You can go to Rome to see earthly power and might yielded by emperors and kings
- Or you can go to see the baby in a manger, and see the power of God working through the humble, the meek, and the powerless
  - Giving out grace and acceptance to anyone who comes walks that way
- If God can come like this: in the dark, vulnerable, poor, oppressed
- Then God can come to you and me here as well.
- This evening, as we find ourselves headed back to Bethlehem once more
  - Luke's Gospel may not be the best historical account every produced, and even some of the details may be a little different than we remember
  - However, the author delivers on what is important:
  - The birth of Jesus was both awesomely divine, and scandalously ordinary
  - Other than angels singing to Shepherds (of all people), that night was void of miracles, except the miracle of human birth itself
  - It was visceral, real, loud, exhausting, and bloody- just like every other person born
  - And yet it was not like the others
  - Infused right into human experience and human history was the penultimate divine intervention
  - The ordinary of humanity becoming a vehicle for the extraordinary of God
  - And perhaps that brings us full circle tonight

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<sup>5</sup> New Interpreter's Bible Commentary, Luke 2:1-20

- Seeing familiar things with new eyes, and finding the divine packed into the ordinary so that there is no longer any ordinary
- Discovering that God is found in every moment of our lives and of the lives of the people near and far
- Audaciously found in every corner of the universe, in every fiber our very being, of our flesh, waiting for us to realize it again
- God's grace and love saturating every ordinary and extraordinary moment of our lives
- That is really the whole story- God became like us so that there no longer was anything to separate us from God
- Emmanuel, God with us.
- We go back to Bethlehem because you and I are reborn there.
- I want to leave you with this Christmas poem by Thomas Merton:

*Make ready for the Christ, Whose smile, like lightning,  
Sets free the song of everlasting glory  
That now sleeps, in your paper flesh, like dynamite.*  
—Thomas Merton, “The Victory”<sup>6</sup>

Amen.

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<sup>6</sup> Richard Rohr's Daily Devotions, Email from 12/21/21, online at <https://email.cac.org/t/ViewEmail/d/6C01DCB6D57876932540EF23F30FEDED/94559016179953939780B6D0B3F3FC10?alternativeLink=False>