

# Christmas Eve 2019

## Scriptures

Luke 2.1-20

## Opening

He is too much of an artist to leave any details to chance, Luke that is. Before we come to the Nativity story, Luke has already shown himself the most musical of the Gospel writers. Zechariah sings, Mary magnified the Lord with a new melody in the Magnificat, soon we'll hear the angels' Gloria, later Simeon sings the Evensong of a joyful, aging man. All in Luke's early episodes of Jesus' life. So yes, every detail matters in Luke's Nativity story.

Even mundane matters like this onerous census. Without the census, they would have stayed in Nazareth in Mary's ninth month. But no, bureaucracy wins and a young betrothed, peasant couple have an arduous, 90-mile journey required by law so the Empire gets their taxes. So see them with the crowds. "All the world went to be registered, each to his own town." Highway traffic. And you just thought highway bottlenecks in December were a modern experience. Try again. See Joseph and Mary traveling the highway with an ancient caravan from Nazareth to Joseph's ancestral home, the little town of Bethlehem. Yes, they'll provide their personal information to Caesar's bureaucrats in Bethlehem, but it's not their names that matter to the Empire. It's their numbers that counts. Two soon to be three, taxes assessed for Joseph and Mary, money this peasant carpenter and his pregnant, betrothed wife could ill afford to lose.

## Lost in the Present Age

We cannot fathom the hardship of their lives, a 90 mile journey on foot, with only the squalor of a borrowed room at the end. But we do know what it's like to be pressed in the

crush of crowds. We suffer from a different kind of crowding. We live in an age of technology and distraction and life has become so crowded. We are the most mobile society, yet perhaps the most isolated and lonely society in human history. This age of acceleration means everyone's always so busy, which means if you're in the midst of crisis, you're not sure who sees you or who has room for you. To be nameless and invisible in the crowd; to feel lost in plain sight, this is our burden

The poet laments:

And no man knows or cares who is his neighbour  
Unless his neighbour makes too much disturbance  
But all dash to and fro in motor cars  
Familiar with the roads and settled nowhere.<sup>1</sup>

If there was no room in the inn for our Lord Jesus, it seems our modern world has become a place where we have precious little room for one another.

Bethlehem is heaving and so is Mary. The body of this little town and the body of this little teenage girl resemble one another. History is full, the prophecies of Israel's Messiah are ready for birth, too, right there in the midst of Bethlehem's crowds.

The little town is heaving with people. Guest rooms, upper rooms, lodging-rooms, all of them are occupied with bodies seeking rest. There is precious little space for people without prior arrangements, without family connections, without wealth. Joseph's family connections in Bethlehem are probably still good, but it's a matter of math and square footage. The only space available for his laboring wife is beside the household animals; the only option for a crib the animals' feeding-trough. It is as if, as R.S. Thomas wrote, that God the Son surveyed all the world he made and said to his Father, "Let me go there." <sup>2</sup>Let me be born in the press of the crowded masses. Let me take the lowliest place. Let me bring glory *there*.

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<sup>1</sup> T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems: 1909-1962*, "Choruses from the Rock," 154.

<sup>2</sup> This phrase is inspired by R.S. Thomas' poem "The Coming"

## In the Fields

As the Son of God lies in a manger, the scene changes. No longer in Bethlehem's congested houses, we move to the spacious fields nearby. Shepherds work a job no one really wants, working the shift no one desires, the night watch. But where they've herded their sheep has no little history. A thousand years before, another shepherd boy tended his father's sheep in the fields near Bethlehem. This is where the prophet Samuel came seeking a king. Israel had gone through an age of darkness and disaster with King Saul. Now Samuel seeks a king among Jesse's sons. None of the older lads seem right. Samuel says, "Go get the youngest boy from the fields." So they fetch David, the youngest and the weakest son of Jesse's brood, from Bethlehem's fields and Samuel fills a vessel with oil and soaks David with the anointing of God.

Now, above the least of Bethlehem's sons, the shepherds of Christmas night, heaven soaks their fields with light and song. Where Samuel sent for David a millennium before, God sends his heavenly messengers with a proclamation: "Do not fear. Unto you is born this day in the City of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord." Unto **you** is born. To you is born a king with the heart of a shepherd.' To you is born a Son greater than the shepherd-king David. When you work in the fields; when your hours are the night watch, you're likely to be the last to know what's going on in the world. But the Shepherd-King born this night will bring a kingdom where the last will be first. <sup>3</sup>So the shepherds are the first to know that God has come to his people. They are the first to hear the new song in the heavens, "Glory to God in the highest." They are the first to witness the shepherd king, wrapped in swaddling clothes.

## The Magnificat at the Manger

When Gabriel appeared to Mary nine months before, she sang in her Magnificat, "(The Lord) has brought down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of humble estate."

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<sup>3</sup> I have received this insight and connection from *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, "Bethlehem." Editor Leland Ryken

She knew the Lord had exalted her to bear the Son of God, but she saw another fulfillment of her holy song when Bethlehem shepherds, men of humble estate found themselves exalted at the manger of the Christ child. *They had been chosen.*

And all the sudden that crowded Bethlehem house became a little more crowded. But it ceased to be a crowd and became a congregation. The shepherds begin shepherding Bethlehem in worship. Luke says, “And when (the shepherds) saw the baby, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning the child. *And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.*”

## The Great Exchange

From the fields to the manger they had been summoned—Unto *you* is born this day. In the midst of the crowds, they ran to the manger. And then the least sons, the shepherds, of the least cities in Judah, Bethlehem, brought wonder back into the city, declaring peace on earth through the Child wrapped in swaddling clothes.

The angels do not appear to Caesar Augustus, or King Herod, or the priests and pastors in Jerusalem. No, the messengers of heaven addressed a peasant girl named Mary; angels commissioned shepherds to proclaim the birth of the Shepherd-King. From the very first, the story showed us the last, the least, and the lost will be first. The child wrapped in swaddling clothes already began putting the world to rights from his manger cradle.

And because he took on flesh, he desires to dwell with us, especially among lowly, lost, and least places within ourselves. When you feel lost in plain sight, remember that Christ was born among the least and the lowly. God took on flesh so he could restore the glory of our humanity that we lost in the Garden of Eden. Our lives are best with great weakness, but as W.H. Auden penned, (as) “Flesh grew weaker, stronger grew the Word/Until on earth the Great Exchange occurred.”

Tonight we celebrate the Great Exchange: he takes on our lowliness so we can take on his glory. He is pleased to take on our weakness so that we can become strong again. “God became man so that man could become like God,” St Athanasius said. And what is the most

one of the most God-like qualities we can know? Joy. And how do you know someone is joyful? When they're singing in worship the song of heaven, "Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. Amen.