

"The Geography of Jesus: Nazareth to Bethlehem"

Luke 2:1-7

December 22, 2019 Advent Four  
York Center Church of the Brethren  
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One verse that changed the world. *"And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."*

That simple verse may not seem earth-shattering to us here at the end of the year 2019, sitting in this sanctuary in Lombard, Illinois. But imagine hearing it as a first century Christian sitting smack dab in the middle of the powerful and brutal Roman Empire. Imagine hearing this story in a world where Caesar was called the "son of god" and the "savior of the world" and anyone who disagreed wasn't around for very long.

Imagine hearing this story set in Bethlehem, a small town of little importance, when everyone knew the power in the world was centered in Rome.

If we can look past our sanitized, cozy, comfortable nativity scenes with the calm and adoring stares of our plastic Mary and Joseph, we can get a glimpse of the radical and subversive nature of Luke's narrative. Luke "earths" his story. He sets it on the solid ground of history by invoking the names of the human power-mongers of the time, Caesar Augustus, the Emperor in Rome, and Quirinius, the Syrian governor. Luke is writing theology, not history, so those who look back in ancient times for proof of this particular census won't find it. Nevertheless, Luke makes sure that " *Jesus was historically located, imperially dated, cosmically significant.*" (1) And he did it all right under the nose of the Imperial power of the Roman Empire. For Luke, Caesar may be issuing orders, but God is keeping promises. It may be a Roman world, but it is God's universe.

Luke's purpose in naming a census was to remind his hearers that the Jews were basically powerless, sent to and fro at the whims of the emperor. His larger purpose, though, was to get Mary and Joseph from their home in Nazareth to the town of Bethlehem, so that the prophesy of the Old Testament prophet, Micah would be fulfilled.

*"But you, O Bethlehem, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."* (5:2)

Take a look at the map in your bulletin. Bethlehem was an important place for the Jews because it was the hometown of David, the shepherd boy, who became their greatest King. So Luke sent a very pregnant young woman, Mary, and her possibly, still a bit bewildered, husband, Joseph, south about ninety miles to the home of his ancestors. It is important in scripture for this child to be born in Bethlehem because he is the fulfillment of God's promise to send a Messiah, a descendant of David.

Although this story does bring a word of comfort and joy to us, Luke's real purpose for the first century Christians was much more edgy and challenging. He was proclaiming, right in the middle of the Empire, the birth of the **true** Son of God, the **true** Savior of the world. And in doing so he named the conflict between the imperial theology of Rome and a theology grounded in the God of Israel. This birth story was an anti-imperial protest wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger.

The prophets of Israel spoke often of their longing for the Messiah, the true Holy One of justice and peace, who would bring about God's transformation of the world. Imagine what it was like to live as an oppressed minority within the confines of the most powerful and cruel Empire ever. *"By the time of Jesus, the ancient Jews had lived under one empire after another for 500 years."* (2) They knew only oppression, violence, and injustice. They cried out to God for deliverance, for a savior.

In their book, *THE FIRST CHRISTMAS*, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan suggest that for Luke, and for all of the New Testament writers, *"Jesus is the completion of the Law and the Prophets. He is their crystallization, their expression in an embodied life. He decisively reveals and incarnates the passion of God as disclosed in the Law and the Prophets- the promise and hope for a very different kind of world from the world of Pharaoh and Caesar, the world of domination and empire."* (3)

We have been on this journey examining "The Geography of Jesus" now for four weeks. We are almost at the end, right? Not quite. We are about half way. This particular journey will take us a few more week- right up through Epiphany on January 5<sup>th</sup>. And we know that our journey of faith will take us much longer than that. It will take us a lifetime. We, and Jesus, have a long way to go. The grace of God shows us that our journey starts new every morning.

Many of us have heard this birth story too many times to count. So my question for us this morning is this: Are we too familiar with this story? Are we too old? Are we too sophisticated? to be surprised by God? I hope not. Did you know that before the mid 300's Christians celebrated the birth of Jesus at different times of the year, including March, April, May and November? Around the year 350, Pope Julius set the date as December 25<sup>th</sup>, integrating with the Roman Winter Solstice Festival. It was a twist on the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun," S-u-n. It became the "Christian birthday of the Son," S-o-n.

The Pope played on the symbolism of the night. In the middle of the night, on what was then considered the longest night of the year, in the time of deepest darkness, Jesus is born, the light of the world. (4)

So now that you know that it is unlikely that Jesus was actually born on December 25<sup>th</sup>, let's ponder something else.

How about the inn. The Greek word Luke uses here is "*kataluma*." Both Mark and Luke use this same word to name the "upper room" in the story of the Last Supper. It can also be translated as "guest room," which was often the upper room in a house. There is no reason to think that Joseph and Mary would have traveled ninety miles to the hometown of his extended family and would not have been welcomed into the home of a relative. Middle Eastern hospitality would have demanded that they be given shelter and support.

In his Brethren Press Advent devotional, my friend, Frank Ramirez, wrote, "in the architecture of the typical Palestinian home of the period, *there was a single large room where all the sleeping and cooking and craftwork took place. Animals lived there, too, on a portion of the floor slightly lower than where the people lived, because they were an essential part of the family economy. When a family expanded, they built a 'kataluma' on the roof, accessible through either an outdoor staircase or an indoor ladder.*

*No doubt when Joseph brought his pregnant fiancée home to Bethlehem the family built an upper room for the newlyweds, but when Mary went into labor, she was moved downstairs because there wasn't enough room in the 'kataluma' upstairs. (5)* And of course, downstairs were the animals.

So, historically and culturally, it is likely that Jesus was born in a modest home, surrounded by his kinfolk. Remember that Luke isn't writing a historical account, he is writing theology. So what might be his motive for placing the birth of the baby Messiah in a stable among the animals?

How far can you get from the palace of the emperor? What would be the total and absolute opposite of the grandeur and ostentatious wealth of the home of the leader of the Empire? Welcome to the stable. By placing the Son of God in a barn, Luke flips human value systems. He locates this most magnificent and miraculous birth right on the edge of human existence. The main action of God's universe happens on the margins of society as far from the center of human power as possible.

The Son of God is born in the place you least expect God to be. Mary prophesied about this in her song of praise when she sang that God "*brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly.*" There is not much lower than a stable floor. Can you see

just how subversive and revolutionary Luke's birth narrative was- and is? As if God coming to earth as a human baby wasn't bizarre enough- this baby was born in a stable and slept in the feed trough. And while Caesar plotted in Rome with his advisors and generals, the eyes of heaven turned toward the little town of Bethlehem.

For Luke's people- this is the story of the birth of the hope of the world. This is their profound assurance that God has entered into the long flow of human history, smuggled into the world inside of Mary's body. At the moment of his birth, no one other than his parents who had been visited by God's messenger, knew that there was anything special about this baby.

His birth was just like every birth- labor and pain and tears. In these verses- there are no angels, no stars, nothing spectacular or supernatural. He was born just as we were born. Nothing to see here folks..... until there was. (We'll hear about that on Christmas Eve.)

Lest you think this birth story was just good news for Luke's beleaguered Christians in first-century Palestine, ponder this- we too sit smack dab in the middle of the Empire. We are called to be "stable Christians" in a world still ruled by Caesar; a world that demands that we worship the Empire instead of our God.

The story of the birth of Jesus is not just meant to warm our hearts. We are meant to be changed by Advent and Christmas. We are called to participate with God in bringing about the transformed world promised by the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. So while we pause by the manger in the coming week to admire the baby, know that we can't stay there. And neither can he.

Christmas is a call to action. It is no less revolutionary now, than it was then. It is no less subversive now, than it was then. It is no less costly to our lives now, than it was then. Those who heard Luke's story understood what it meant- it meant that God had come into the world in a whole new way- as one of them. It meant that God, in the form of baby Jesus, breathed our air and walked on our earth. It meant that there was no longer any place they could go where God had not already gone. It was extraordinarily good news then- as it is now.

*"The time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger."*

And the hopes and fears of all the years were met in him that night.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

## End Notes:

- THE FIRST CHRISTMAS: WHAT THE GOSPELS REALLY TEACH ABOUT JESUS'S BIRTH, Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, Harper One, 2007. P. 149.
- THE FIRST CHRISTMAS, P. 220.
- THE FIRST CHRISTMAS, p. 224-225.
- THE FIRST CHRISTMAS, p. 172.
- "Ready," 2019 Advent Devotional, Frank Ramirez. Brethren Press. 2019. Friday, December 20, 2019, "What's In a Word?"

