

Luke 2:1-20

Expectation. Birth. Manger. Shepherds. Angels. Witness. These are the details that constitute the common ingredients of our Christmas story. In Luke's Gospel, a concentration of Davidic references prevail, giving Bethlehem greater significance. Bethlehem is not only the birth place and home of Joseph, but connects with Jesus' continuation of the Davidic lineage and mission.

It was during a cold winter's night in Bethlehem in the Judean hills that the pains of childbirth came upon Mary. For her, motherhood arrived amid harsh, hard, and brutal conditions. This loving, heavenly event probably did not happen as she had planned. And if we look closely, we will see in the birth and life of the Christ child, a parable about life with all of its heavenly and human qualities. It is much like our own lives, where there is the blending of the heavenly and the earthly, joy and sorrow, anticipation and disappointment.

Let's consider the place where heavenly glory touched the earth. It happened in the birth of a child on the outskirts of Bethlehem, a remote Judean village. The miracle was not so much the pregnancy of a woman who was not living with a man, but that this child, born in such surroundings, should be the Messiah.

The Christ child did not come into the world as a privileged person. He had no soft, downy mattress to lie on; there was no warm water to bathe

him and clean him up after he had been birthed. His mother had no professional assistance at his birth. There was no one to make him sweet smelling and desirable. There was no one to wrap him in soft, clean blankets and present him to her. There were no Pampers, no Baby Guess outfits or little sweaters and booties that grandma knit.

The Christ child did not even have the minimal comforts afforded the poor. There was no blazing fire in his house, no turkey or ham in the oven, no cookies to munch on. Jesus and his parents fall in the category of the underprivileged. And it was here, in the most unexpected place, that the light of God touched the earth as never before.

Imagine if we were to transpose this birth into the twentieth century, into our time. The Messiah would be born in an unheated storage shed, behind a motel some seventy miles from home with a cardboard box and maybe some old rags or newspapers for a bed. Can you think of a more scandalous place to find the Christ-child?

Luke does not let us escape the scandal of God's actions. From the beginning to the end, Jesus is an outcast among outcasts for the outcast. The story of this birth from Luke's Gospel suggests that God has chosen to side with the oppressed against the oppressor. If that is true, it would appear that anyone or any church that has lost sight of human oppression and poverty will certainly lose the full impact of Jesus' birth. The Davidic connection is also asserted through the reference to the

shepherds in the field. It echoes back to the iconic shepherd-king of Israel, David. In our story, it was the shepherds who first heard the message about Jesus' birth. Why the dirty, smelly shepherds? Because God is to be found in the places of dire human need.

The arrival of the Christ child confirms that God comes to us right where we are. God does not ask us to clean ourselves up or to straighten ourselves out. God knows how hopelessly we have been doing that. And since we cannot go to where God is, God comes to us and meets us right where we are.

A point worth noting is how the presence of shepherds and angels shifts the meeting place of humans and the divine from the Temple to the fields. At the birth of Jesus, the place of meeting shifts to the common and everyday space of devoted people like shepherds in the field.

God comes to us through people with all of their shortcomings, ordinariness, and disabilities - especially the disability of poverty. The coming of the Christ child tells us that God cares for all people. Through Jesus, God is Emmanuel, who comes to us by the roadside in the normal, daily events of everyday life.

It is like the woman who in the ordinary activity of her day comes to draw water from the well. In her daily routine she encounters Jesus at the well and her life is changed forever.

It is like Matthew sitting in his tax office conducting his business as he does every day. In that normal, ordinary, everyday setting he meets Jesus and follows him, never to return to the office again. The same is true for us. Christ comes to us right where we are, amid all of our human entanglements, amid the ordinary. It is not always easy for us to think of God in such ordinary terms.

This is exactly why the hometown folks in Mark's Gospel had such difficulty in accepting Jesus as Messiah. He was too much like them. If this was God, then God was just too ordinary. They spoke up and said, "We know who he is. He is not fooling us. That's the carpenter's son. That's Joseph's boy." This meant that he was from the unimpressive side streets of Nazareth. He was from the industrial park area where he lived over the carpenter shop with his family. They said among themselves, "He is from the lower order. What does he know?"

They certainly had the facts on him. They knew his origin, his family, his name, and occupation. We've all met people who, knowing the origin of someone, insist that they understand all there is to know about that person. They are convinced that people from certain locations, races, cultures, or backgrounds are all alike and that no one of any importance can come from those kinds of roots. The hometown folks had the facts on Jesus, but they did not really know him.

That day, those hometown folks in Nazareth stumbled all over the truth

and couldn't recognize it because it appeared so ordinary, so obvious and familiar. How hard it was for them, and still is for us, to realize that liberation comes to us on limping, human feet! The highest comes to us amid the lowest.

Leo Tolstoy tells the story of a cobbler, whose name was Conrad, a godly man who made shoes in his humble shop. One night the cobbler dreamed that the next day Jesus was coming to his shop. He got up early the next morning and went to the woods to gather green boughs to decorate his shop in order to receive so great a guest.

He waited all morning and the only thing that happened was that an old man shuffled up, asking to rest. Conrad saw that his shoes were worn through, so he brought the man in. "I'll give you a new pair of shoes," he said and put on the old man the sturdiest shoes in the shop before sending him on his way.

He waited through the afternoon and the only happening was that an old woman under a heavy load of firewood came by. She was weary and, out of compassion, Conrad brought her in and gave her some of the food he had prepared for his special, anticipated guest. She ate with relish, for she was hungry. Refreshed, she went on her way.

As night came a lost child, crying bitterly, entered his shop. The cobbler was annoyed by the child's presence, because he felt it necessary to

leave his shop and take the child to his home. As he returned to his shop he was convinced that he had missed his Lord.

Sadly, he sat down, and in his imagination he lived through the moments with Jesus as he imagined they might have been. He thought to himself, "What a great time it could have been"

Conrad cried, "Why is it Lord, that your feet have delayed in coming? Have you forgotten that this was the day?" Then softly in the silence a voice was heard:

*Lift up your heart for I kept my word.
Three times I came to your friendly door;
Three times my shadow was on your floor.
I was a beggar with bruised feet;
I was the woman you gave to eat;
I was the child on the homeless street.*

The highest comes in the lowest.

How are things with us this Christmas? Is it possible we have no sense of the nearness and the presence of God? Maybe for some of us, angels' voices are never heard and the thrill of the high and the holy never enters our life. Perhaps nothing about Christmas really grabs us. Perhaps we are having a hard time really catching the spirit of the season and are just going through the motions. It could be that we have been looking in the wrong place. It is not to be found in what we receive

but in what we give.

Martin of Tours was a Roman soldier and a deeply committed Christian who lived in France in the fourth century. The story has it that early one winter morning he was met by a beggar who was shivering and blue from the cold. Without hesitation Martin took off his army cloak and wrapped it around the beggar's shoulders. That night he had a dream. In it he saw a vast multitude gathered in heaven and Jesus stood among them, clad in a Roman army cloak. One of the angels asked, "Lord, where did you get that Roman army cloak?" Jesus answered softly. "My servant Martin gave it to me."

This Christmas Jesus stands among us, although disguised. If we turn away the addict, the beggar, the elderly, the lonely, the refugee, or the powerless, we may be turning away Jesus. To meet our neighbour or a stranger at the level of his or her need is to meet Jesus. It is possible that the highest and the holiest come to us in the least and lowest.

Jesus' birth is God's gesture - a gesture that continues to show that God is not abandoning creation, but is always working to connect humanity across time to each other and to God's self. The focus of Luke's Christmas story does not reside in the narrative details modern Christians have come to love - manger, angels, shepherds, wisemen.

Rather, the purpose of Luke's interpretive effort manifests in the

impression and understanding of the identity and work of Jesus Christ and God's love for the world imparted to their hearers and readers of the Gospel record - a moment worth communicating and expecting.

May God help us understand in our hearts and experience in our lives the true meaning of the coming of Christ, and may our hearts and homes be converted into fit dwelling places for the Christ child to enter in.

Amen

Christmas Love

Paraphrase of 1 Corinthians

If I decorate my house perfectly with plaid bows, strands of twinkling lights and shiny balls, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another decorator.

If I slave away in the kitchen, baking dozens of Christmas cookies, preparing gourmet meals and arranging a beautifully adorned table at mealtime, but do not show love to my family, I'm just another cook.

If I work at the soup kitchen, carol in the nursing home and give all that I have to charity, but do not show love to my family, it profits me nothing.

If I trim the spruce with shimmering angels and crocheted snowflakes, attend a myriad of holiday parties and sing in the choir's cantata but do not focus on Christ, I have missed the point.

Love stops the cooking to hug the child.

Love sets aside the decorating to kiss the spouse. Love is kind, though harried and tired.

Love doesn't envy another's home that has coordinated Christmas china and table linens. Love doesn't yell at the kids to get out of the way.

Love doesn't give only to those who are able to give in return but rejoices in giving to those who can't.

Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

Love never fails. Video games will break, pearl necklaces will be lost, golf clubs will rust, but giving the gift of LOVE will endure.