

THE PLACES OF THE NATIVITY: BETHLEHEM

Caring for the Gift

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Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

This morning is the second Sunday of Advent, the season of waiting and preparation that leads up to Christmas. This Advent Steve and I are preaching a series on the Places of the Nativity, discussing the significant settings where different pieces of the Christmas story took place. Last week Steve began the series by talking about Nazareth, the town where the angel first appeared to Mary telling her of the child that she would have. Through the story of Nazareth, Steve reminded us of God's power and ability to bring about wonderful and miraculous things from seemingly small and inconsequential places. We were challenged to see the ways in which God is doing the same today.

This morning then we turn to talk about the city of Bethlehem. Modern day Bethlehem is a city of about 30,000 people that is located about six miles southwest of Jerusalem. Bethlehem is an important city for Jews because it was the birthplace and home of King David and because Rachel's tomb, an important holy site in Judaism, lies on the outskirts of town. Bethlehem is also an important city for us as Christians because it is considered to be the birthplace of Jesus. The Church of the Nativity was built in Bethlehem in approximately the year 330 by the emperor Constantine. It still stands

today on the site where Jesus was believed to have been born and it is possibly the oldest existing Christian Church in the world.

While Bethlehem is an important city for Jews and Christians alike, it has been under the control of the Palestinian Authority for the last 12 years following the implementation of the Oslo Accords. Today Bethlehem is the head of the Bethlehem Governorate and is the central hub for culture and tourism for Palestinians.

Bethlehem is a city in which much difficulty and much tension exists today. Most of the entrances and exits in and out of the city are blocked by Israeli checkpoints and roadblocks. Travel for Palestinian residents of Bethlehem from the West Bank into Israeli-controlled Jerusalem is quite difficult as it is controlled by a permit system. These permits are increasingly complicated to obtain and travel from Bethlehem to Jerusalem is increasingly difficult for Palestinian citizens. Adding to the difficulty is the fact that over the last several years Israel has built a large barrier separating off the West Bank. This wall has impacted Bethlehem in some very negative ways: politically, socially, and economically.

Two weeks ago now Steve and I were at a continuing education event with Charles Page, an archeologist and scholar who is well connected with the current situation in Israel. Charles told stories of families who have literally been separated by this wall and who aren't able to obtain the necessary permits to visit one another. Grandparents living on one side of the wall literally have no other option to see their grandchildren except for seeing them as they are lifted above the barricade. The realities are tragic and heartbreaking.

While Bethlehem today is a city in which much conflict and turmoil exists, it is a city about which we know relatively little from the time of Jesus. Archeologists have found little from Bethlehem or the surrounding area to provide clues about life at the time of Jesus. While we don't know much about the city of Bethlehem from the time that Jesus was born, let's take a few minutes today to look at the story of Jesus' birth as it is told in Luke as we continue our journey through Advent and the Places of the Nativity.

The well known Christmas story from the Gospel of Luke opens with the following verses:

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

There are three significant pieces of this story that we'll take a couple of minutes to look into this morning. First of all, the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem is set up by Luke as being necessary to fulfill the requirements of a registration – a census. One of the things that we do know is that the city of Bethlehem would have been important for Jews of Jesus' time because it was the birthplace and the home of King David. For early Christians who confessed Jesus as the Messiah, it only made sense that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, as a part of the lineage of David. And so the journey that Mary and Joseph take to Bethlehem, where Jesus is ultimately born, is an important element for the author of Luke to include in the story to help make the case that Jesus is a descendent of David, one who could be the Messiah.

The second significant point worth discussing in Luke's telling of the story is what Mary does after giving birth to Jesus. Taking and wrapping a new born child in bands of cloth was a common practice for mothers in that time period. Doing so was a way of protecting and caring for the new born child by making sure that limbs were secure and that the child was warm and safe. The fact that Mary wrapped the baby Jesus in bands of cloth is a significant detail as it represents the tender love and care with which she treated the new gift she had received.

And the third detail that is worth mentioning from these few verses is that after wrapping Jesus in bands of cloth, Mary had nowhere to lay him but in a manger. While Mary's wrapping of the baby in bands of cloth was a symbol of her love and care for the gift of a child, the fact that there was no place for Jesus to lie other than a lowly place like a manger was symbolic of the lack of care that would be given to him by the rest of humanity. It can be seen as a foreshadowing if you will of what was to come.

Mary receives and cares for the gift of the newborn Jesus that was given to her. Humanity however, is implicated in Luke's telling of the story for failing to adequately receive and care for the gift that we were given. And today, as we move through Advent and prepare for Christmas, we are faced with that very same choice. Will we receive and care for the gift or will we neglect the gift and push it to the back in our lives.

The story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is a story about gifts and our opportunities to respond to those gifts. And while the Christmas season is a time of year that includes a great deal of gift giving, I fear that we all too often miss the point. Recent statistics on the holidays are staggering. This year, the average individual consumer in the United States plans to spend \$924 on holiday related shopping. During the 2005 holiday season

consumers spent \$438.6 billion dollars and much of this was likely money that we didn't really have. Studies showed that in November of 2003, 54% of consumers were still paying off credit card debt from the previous year's holiday season.

The damage that we tend to do during the holiday season is not only to our pocketbooks, it is also to the environment. The amount of household garbage generated in the United States increases by 25 percent between Thanksgiving and New Year each year – that's an extra 1 million tons of trash generated each week. And then there are Christmas trees - approximately 50 million Christmas trees are purchased each year and of those, approximately 30 million end up in landfills. And don't forget Christmas cards – the amount of cards sold each holiday season would fill a football field 10 stories high and requires harvesting nearly 300,000 trees annually.

In addition to what we do to our pocketbooks and the environment during this season we often end up hurting ourselves both physically and emotionally as well. As we gather for parties with family and friends during this holiday season we are exposed to plenty of opportunities to eat and drink too much. With the increased demand on our time it is also easy for us to both exercise and sleep less than we should be too. And according the National Mental Health Association, the financial and family stresses of the holiday can cause many to have the "holiday" blues which in many cases transforms the holidays into a time of anxiety and depression.

If aliens from a distant planet were observing our culture right now here is how they might sum up what they see. Humans from the United States prepare for and celebrate the birth of a man named Jesus by spending lots of money (often going into debt), by creating a lot of trash and waste, by eating too much, by sleeping and exercising

too little, and by becoming stressed, tired, and cranky. I imagine they would feel quite perplexed by what they witnessed. If we stop and think about it ourselves, I hope that we too might feel equally perplexed by what we do to ourselves and to our planet as we celebrate the gift of Jesus during this holiday season.

Now I imagine that many of you are thinking, come on Jeff, you just don't get it, you don't know my family, or you don't understand, I have to make a big deal for Christmas because (fill in the blank) reason. And I don't understand and know the details of each and every one of your situations. But I do know the struggle that I face each year at Christmas, the struggle that Heather and I go through trying to figure out how to find meaningful gifts or do meaningful things for people in our lives without hurting the environment, our pocketbooks, or our sanity. And I know that it's not easy!

But I also know the story that we celebrate during this holiday season and find myself having to be constantly reminded of its truth and its power. I am reminded of Mary and of her tender love and care as she welcomed and received and cared for the gift of Christ. I am reminded of the fact that the baby Jesus was put into a manger when he was born because no room was allowed for him in the inn. And I want desperately to be more like Mary than like the rest of the world, I want desperately to find ways to truly embrace and care for the gift of this season. And I know that many of you desperately want the same.

I love the illustration on the front of your bulletin this morning. I can picture these geese gathering together every 7th day to listen to one of the ganders preach about their lofty destiny and the gift of flight that they have been given. I can see the geese nodding their heads approvingly and then waddling back to their respective places in the

yard to eat the grain that has been scattered for them. I can see the geese chatting about the sermon through the course of the week, but never taking the time to break free from their routines to actually use the gift of flight that they've been given.

I can picture this scene all too well because we are these geese. We are given many gifts, but we can't simply nod our heads affirmingly as we listen to someone talk about the gifts on a Sunday morning. We must learn to utilize the gifts, to put them into action, to share them with others. And so the challenge exists for us today, how can we be more like Mary who receives the gift of Christ and comforts and cares for him. How can we be less like we have always been in the past, neglecting the gift because we've been too wrapped up in our own things?

The story of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem reminds us, not just of the gift that we've been given, but of our call to embrace and to care for that gift. So, I challenge us all in these coming weeks, to break free from those things in which we get so consumed during this time of year, and to find some time to slow down, to pause, and to embrace the true gift of this season.