

Christmas at Home

Luke 2:1-20

Sometimes traditions shape our view of Scripture instead of the other way around—Scripture shaping our traditions. As people who hold to *sola Scriptura*—the Bible is our highest and only infallible authority—we are glad to grow in our understanding of what God gave us in His Word. Jesus was probably not born in an outdoor stable, and though no primary doctrine is touched by this, it affects our understanding of the story and how we apply it.

No Room in the Guest Quarters

Caesar Augustus called for a census, so Joseph and Mary leave Nazareth to go to Bethlehem, the “city of David”, since he is descended from David (vv. 4-5). Mary does not give birth upon their arrival, but “while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered” (v. 6). She gives birth, wraps Him in swaddling cloths, and lays Him in a manger because there is no room in the “inn” (v. 7). Although Jerusalem is known as the city of David, the little town of Bethlehem is also associated with king David and so also takes the name. Joseph is going home and given the obligation of hospitality in Israel and Joseph’s descent from David, it would be odd for him not to be able to secure a place for his wife to give birth. Even if Mary’s reputation is tarnished by being pregnant out of wedlock, John and Elizabeth understood (others must have as well) and lived not far away in the “hill country of Judea” (Lk. 1:39). If not hosted by some relative or friend, it would also be strange for Joseph to wait until Mary was in labor to find a place. The word for “inn” in verse 7 is *kataluma*, which is translated as “guest room” when Jesus secured a place to eat the Last Supper with His disciples (Mk. 14:14; Lk. 22:11). In the Parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus uses a different word for “inn” where the injured man was lodged (Lk. 10:34). A common Palestinian home consisted of one central family room where everyone lived and slept, and a small separate room (*kataluma*) or rooftop for guests. The main room had a lower, smaller “stable” section where at night animals would be brought in to sleep safe from thieves and predators. Feeding troughs or “mangers” would allow them to feed during the night without disturbing everyone sleeping in the room, and then in the day they would be kept in a courtyard outside the house. With the census swamping Bethlehem with visitors, there’s no space for Joseph and Mary in the guest room, so Jesus is born in the main room of a common house where at least another family and perhaps guests are also staying. Wrapped in swaddling cloths like any newborn baby (cf. Ezek. 16:40), Jesus is set in the feeding trough in that room, surrounded by family and friends.

The Angelic Flash Mob

Bethlehem was one of the cities that provided sacrificial sheep for the temple in Jerusalem. That night, shepherds in the same country are watching their sheep when an angel of Lord stands before them and the glory of the Lord shines around and terrifies them (v. 9). He tells them not to be afraid because he brings good tidings of great joy for all people. The Savior, Christ the Lord, is born, and they will find Him wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger (v. 12). This prompts a multitude of the heavenly host to appear and burst into song: “Glory to God in highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men!” (v. 14). They then go back into heaven, and the shepherds hustle to find Jesus in the manger (vv. 15-16). Having seen Him, they go and tell everyone they know, causing them to marvel, and Mary gathers all of these things up and ponders them in her heart (vv. 17-19). The shepherds return to their fields, glorifying and praising God “as it was told them” (v. 20). This scene with the shepherds is long (twelve verses) among the accounts at Jesus’ birth. It’s tied to the scene where Jesus is born by the word “manger” which occurs three times (vv. 7, 12, 16). While Mary did not give birth in an outdoor stable, the shepherds certainly were outside when they were met by the heavenly host. These guys went from terrified to amazed, and they told the story so that people who heard

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them were amazed. This is the third day of Christmas, which is helpful to remember if you feel like you're descending too quickly from the joy of the first day of Christmas, but think of what it would be like to be one of those shepherds. They went back to their *night* jobs. The story they told was no different than the story we tell, except that it lacked all the rest of what Christ did. But they believed and were amazed. The greatest announcement, the greatest song this world has ever heard was sung to some shepherds in the hills around Bethlehem. We have no cellphone video or audio, which wouldn't do it justice anyway. They went and found Joseph, Mary recovering, and Jesus in a feeding trough. Then they went home to celebrate the extraordinary in the midst of their ordinary lives.

Glory in the Ordinary

Sometimes the lesson taken from the birth of Jesus is that all alone in a remote stable, Joseph and Mary had Jesus, the newborn King. It looks different to picture them in a common Israelite home in the village of Bethlehem, in the main, living, sleeping, and eating room of the house next to the occupied guest room, probably with animals nearby in a designed part of the same room. Does this ruin your nativity set? Christmas is the time when we typically get together with family and friends, and whenever this happens, we deal with the problems that come with people—that is, with sin, both ours and theirs, and just the work of being with others. We may think that Joseph and Mary were poor and away from home, but at least they were free from other burdens and distractions, until we realize they weren't. It looks like Jesus' early life was just like His ministry, surrounded by people who needed and exhausted Him. We celebrate Christmas in the midst of other people. We also celebrate Christmas in the midst of lots of stuff. None of this ought to be a distraction from Jesus or the glory of God. Jesus was not born into this world to sneak us off into meaningful prayer walks of silence and solitude. He came to love us; having loved us He calls us to love others in and word and deed. Do you know what Mary did on Christmas? Change Jesus' diapers, figure out how to breastfeed, and deal with all the people in the house. Some of them were probably tired and ornery. Mary was not distracted by these things. She saw the glory of Christ right there in the midst of it. She prays and thinks and ponders all while taking care of the newborn king in all the ordinary ways. There is nothing wrong with silence and solitude, so long as they're not pursued selfishly. But the way to be like Jesus—at His birth and during His ministry—is to be surrounded by people and love them. This is why we gather as the church, as the body of Christ. Our goal ought to be to thrive in the circumstances God has placed us, to love as many people as we can, to lay our down our lives for the images of God that *the* image of God, the Lord Jesus Christ, has put before us. Merry Christmas at home and everywhere.