

Let's start this evening with a little conversation starter around your table: *Share a Christmas tradition from your childhood that you think was somewhat unique.*

For many of us Christmas evokes powerful memories and feelings that stem back to our childhood and often run right through our adulthood. It is both culturally and in many ways religiously the high point of the year, but that was not always the case. The early Christian Church gave little thought to Jesus' birth, as witnessed by the fact that two of the Gospels say nothing about it, and neither does Paul. Easter, the celebration of the Resurrection, was celebrated from the beginning and has always been – at least theologically – more important than Christmas.

Although our reading for today included the birth of John the Baptist, because Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is so well-known we're going to spend all of our time digging into it. And I'll tell you up front that today I have good news for you, and I have bad news for you. Here's the good news: God's Son, the Messiah, the Savior, was born in human flesh over 2,000 years ago in a small town called Bethlehem. Here's the bad news: a surprising amount of what you think you know about the story of Jesus' birth isn't true and doesn't come from the bible at all. It's a combination of legend and Hallmark. So let's dive in.

Let's begin with the basics: when was Jesus born? Most people would say that Jesus was born on December 25 "0". Since Jesus' birth is the dividing line between B.C. and A.D. Jesus would have been born in "0". But the truth is we don't know when Jesus was born because the Bible doesn't tell us. Here's what we do know:

1. There is no "0" year. Our calendar goes from 1 B.C. to A.D. 1
2. Our current calendar is at least 4 years off. It was established in 525 on insufficient historical data. Herod the Great is said to have been ruling when Jesus was born, but history shows that he died in 4 B.C.
3. There's lots of controversy surrounding the December 25th date, and you may know that other Christians, such as the Orthodox Church, celebrates Christmas in early January. The date of December 25 originated in 4th century Rome and was probably chosen for many different reasons, not the last of which is that there were several pagan festivals celebrated at that time and the early Church had a habit of co-opting pagan festivals.
4. Probably not in the winter – shepherds.
5. Best guess is in September/early October 4-5 B.C.

Now here's the big question: does any of that matter? Not at all! We don't know when he's coming back either!!

Jesus' Birth

With that introduction, let's get to the text **[Read 2:1-7]**

Notice again that Luke sets Jesus' birth within an historical, political context. He names both the emperor and local governor. To Luke's readers his meaning would not be lost. Luke is not only suggesting that Jesus is the ultimate authority in heaven AND on earth, but he's contrasting the humble beginnings of Jesus with the extravagance of the Roman leadership. Why is that important? Right from the start Luke is telling us something about Jesus – he didn't come to be served but to serve...a point that would become much clearer as Luke's story continues.

What's with the census? It was an aide to military conscription and taxation. It was not normal for citizen to have to register in their hometowns, but Jewish tradition required it. Why does Luke note the census? To tell us how Joseph, who was from Nazareth, got all the way to Bethlehem. And why is THAT important? It all goes back to Old Testament prophecy. Micah 5:2 tells us that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem.

Isn't it interesting that God uses a pagan leader...Caesar who claimed to be a god...to work out his plan? No matter what you think of the person in the White House or the Senate or State House we can trust that God can work in and through them without their even knowing it. When I get discouraged with the political process I try to remember that!

So...Joseph goes to Bethlehem...the hometown of his ancestor, David. Bethlehem is located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem. Archeological evidence suggests that at the time of Jesus' birth it probably had about 200 residents. The journey for Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem was between 70-80 miles. You may remember that Mary's journey from Nazareth to the Judean hill country was about that same distance. Mary did a ton of traveling during this pregnancy!!

As you know Mary was very near her delivery at the time of this journey and so she rode a donkey all the way to Bethlehem. What a gallant guy Joseph is! But that's not what the story says. How do you know Mary was nearing full term when she made this journey? We don't! The legend says that Mary was in labor when she arrived in Bethlehem, but what does the story say? It simply says, "While they were there..." We have no idea how long they were there. And the story never mentions a donkey.

As you know when Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem they sought to get a room at an inn, but there was none because the town was so crowded due to the census, so Mary wound up giving birth in a stable or barn. Well...maybe not! There are a couple of problems with that understanding of the story. First, as I mentioned Bethlehem was a tiny town. Archeological evidence suggests that it had perhaps 200 residents. It was NOT on a Roman road which is where almost all ancient inns were located. In addition, there is no archeological evidence to suggest that an inn existed in Bethlehem at that time.

There's a second problem with the "inn theory". The Middle East had and still has a deep tradition of hospitality. It was unthinkable to leave a stranger to sleep in the town square, let alone a pregnant woman. Even if Joseph had no immediate family in Bethlehem all he would have needed to do was mention that he was a descendant of David and every home in Bethlehem would have been opened to him. Surely Mary's cousin, Elizabeth, who lived only a few miles from Bethlehem, would have taken them into her home. The text never says that Mary gave birth to her child in a stable or a barn or a cave.

So what's the deal here? Where DID Mary and Joseph stay? Scholars now suggest that it wasn't an inn at all that Mary and Joseph couldn't get into. The Greek word that Luke uses – katalouma – more often means guest room. If Luke meant an inn he would have used the proper term – pandochion – but he doesn't. Turn to Luke 22:11. Same word translated "guest room." Take a look at Luke 10:34...that's pandochion.

It might help here to understand something about the homes in Jesus' day. Most were merely one divided room – living space and lower level for animals. Some actually had a guest room – a katalouma...either at the back of the house or on a second floor.

So, let me try to tell the story of Jesus' birth in a more likely way: Being a good Jew, Joseph sets off for his ancestral home of Bethlehem to register for the census in the fall of 4-5 B.C. He doesn't have to take Mary with him, but he does – perhaps because he's afraid for her safety, perhaps because he

doesn't want to be separated from her, perhaps because he doesn't want to miss the birth of this miraculous child...or maybe the Spirit nudged him. They journey together for several days and finally arrive in Bethlehem. They connect with people in the town and are welcomed into someone's home. However, the guestroom of that home is already full with some other travelers. It wouldn't be good manners to kick these other guests out, so Mary and Joseph are welcomed into the main room of the house. Sometime during their stay Mary gives birth...which almost always happened in people's homes. And when the baby Jesus was born he was placed in one of the feeding troughs.

While that's a more plausible fleshing out of the story Luke tells, there are a couple of important points that these details don't change in the least.

- Being obedient often takes us out of our comfort zones. No matter how far along Mary was in her pregnancy it was certainly not comfortable for her to travel all the way to Bethlehem. Traveling in those days was neither easy nor safe. Did Mary and Joseph know that this census was part of God's plan? Or did they just trust that no matter what happened nothing could get in the way of God's will being done? More importantly, do you?
- The most overwhelming message of Luke's record of Jesus' birth is the incredible paradox of God – the God of the whole Universe, the One who created all things with a word – entering into this world in such obscurity. A peasant girl for a mother, birth on the floor of a peasant's home. You can't hear this story and not wonder, "Where else will God show up?" And I suspect that's a question Luke would love for us to ask.

The Shepherds and the Angels

Despite the obscurity of Jesus' birth, it didn't remain a secret for long! And now, I'd like to invite a friend of mine to read to us the next part of the story: **[play Charlie Brown: the Meaning of Christmas]**

Shepherds? Anyone but shepherds! If you had a daughter you'd rather they marry a tax-collector than a shepherd. At least he'd be a rich shyster. Shepherds were just poor shysters. They worked on the Sabbath. They let their sheep graze on land that didn't belong to them. And they stunk like sheep dip...all the time. They were so low on the social scale that they were not allowed in the city, not allowed to give testimony in court or even enter the Jerusalem temple. You couldn't get much lower on the social scale than shepherds. And yet these were the very people to whom God chose to reveal the birth of His Son into the world. Once again Luke is showing us the great reversal, the lifting up of the poor, the outcast and the underdog. But Luke is also saying some other important things:

- The Savior has come for the humble of this world, those who know they haven't got a prayer
- It isn't the righteous and religious on the inside who "get it" when it comes to the Messiah; it is those on the outside who respond with faith: a peasant girl, shepherds, Roman centurions, lepers.... Jesus is found by and found in "the least of these."
- Remember that Jesus is descended from David who was also a shepherd. Jesus will shepherd His people.

These shepherds are out tending their flocks by night. Here's a clue as to how we can be pretty certain that Jesus wasn't born in December...or in the winter at all. Winter in Palestine can get pretty cold. During the winter months shepherds would bring their flocks in and sleep indoors. It was in the summer and early fall that shepherds would be out at night with their flocks.

An angel appears to these shepherds, and the “glory of the Lord” shines around them. What is glory? It is the visible manifestation of the divine splendor. In the case of the shepherds it sounds like a brilliant light since it “shone” around them. In Jesus’ day it was taught that the glory of the Lord dwelled in the Jerusalem temple, specifically above the Foundation Stone located on the floor at the center of the Holy of Holies. This Foundation Stone was believed to be the very stone that Jacob laid his head on while sleeping at Bethel (Genesis 28) when he saw in a dream the angels of the Lord ascending and descending a ladder from heaven to earth. So catch the significance of what Luke is saying: with the birth of Jesus God’s glory has left the temple. It is being revealed to common people. God has come down to earth.

Naturally the angel tells the shepherd to “fear not” because people always freak when an angel shows up. He announces Good News of great joy...now catch this...”for all people.” Not just the Jews who were expecting a Messiah, not just for the “good” people, but for all people. And this Good News is the birth of “the Christ” – Greek for Messiah or anointed one. And the sign that this good news is true is that the shepherds will find a baby in manger. What would you think if you were a shepherd?

And to make things more interesting suddenly a huge number of angels show up. And what do they do? The text doesn’t say they sang! It says they praised God and SAID... All heaven breaks loose in praise. In Revelation it says that heaven is filled with thousands upon thousands, and ten thousands upon ten thousands of angels. And the content of their praise is this, “Glory to God in the highest, an on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.” The peace mentioned here is the peace that only the Savior can bring...reconciliation between God and humanity, and between all people. And “those on whom his favor rests” are those who will receive this good news of the Savior’s birth.

The Shepherd’s Response

And how do the shepherds respond to this angelic announcement? Let’s finish today’s passage by reading verses 15-20 [**READ**].

Notice what the shepherds do when they find Jesus. First, they give God all the glory. They praise Him. And second, they tell others. They share the good news with others. Throughout the rest of Luke’s Gospel we encounter all sorts of religious people and spiritual authorities who hear the good news and deny it, rebel against it, seek to destroy Jesus. But once again the lowly, the social outcasts, receive the good news with joy and act upon it. They believe. They share it with others.

So, let me ask you: why do you think the shepherds shared this good news with others? Now let me ask you this: why don’t you share the good news with others? What do the shepherds have that you don’t? What barriers to proclaiming the good news of what God is up to in Jesus are you having a hard time getting over? Your neighborhood is filled with people who don’t know the real good news that Luke is proclaiming...that God is restoring this world and our lives right here and now and we are invited and empowered to be a part of it.

Lots of people here at Prince of Peace talk about wanting to see the church grow, but I find surprisingly few who are connecting with people outside the church, sharing the story and inviting people to be a part of it. This January we’re going to be doing a sermon series about this very thing, because we need to be equipped and encouraged to share the good news with others in ways that are effective and easy. The angels never commanded the shepherds to share the good news, but they did. Jesus commanded us to share the good news, but most of us don’t. That needs to change.

Finally, notice Mary’s reaction to the shepherds’ visit. First she treasured all these things. That means she held them as dear and important and worthy of “storing away” in her heart. And second she

“pondered them” which means she mulled them over in order to try to understand them. And what exactly were all the things that she treasured and pondered? The angelic announcement, the birth, Elizabeth’s pregnancy, the shepherd’s experience. It must have been just a bit overwhelming for Mary...not to mention the fact that she was now a mom!

So, some of what Hallmark has told us about Christmas doesn’t quite line up with what Luke actually says. But the most important point of this text is that the Savior has been born. John 3:16 says, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only son.” Many people assume that the phrase “he gave his only son” refers to the cross, but it doesn’t. It refers to the incarnation, to Jesus’ birth. God loved this world, God loved you and me so much that he came into this world in human flesh to proclaim the good news that we are loved. That is the good news of Christmas.