

Luke 2:1-20

1In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration, 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.

8In that region, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” 13And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” 15When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

The glory of Christmas comes to me in my family. Marlene, Gus, and I will head home to St. Louis soon and celebrate Christmas with my family, as we have every year, except the first year of Covid, since we have been here and, indeed, in many years before that. I really love the idea that there is no place like home for the holidays, home being a place with people you love, and home is also where the heart is. And we are blessed to have two homes, one in St. Louis and one right here. Our hearts are here with you and also in St. Louis.

But there are some for whom that kind of warmth is a foreign concept; issues of health, fertility, family dynamics, the recent death or illness of a loved one, politics, or the struggle to get from one day to the next keep them from the inner peace of the season.

As we celebrate, let's remember that not everyone may feel the same way we do. I know we have all felt down at times, and some still feel pain from some of these situations or others. Let's be sensitive to people who are hurting this time of year and be kind to ourselves if that is us.

But remember that amid that joy, trauma, or grief, God comes to us with good news in the Christmas story itself. Let's revisit that familiar story of the birth of Jesus, Emmanuel, God is with us.

Just as many of us travel over the holidays, the holy couple must also journey home to be with family.

The story starts as a matter of divine logistics, with God directing the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, where it is prophesied that the Messiah, the Christ, will be born. As Micah 5:2 reads, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah,

out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” So, Jesus needs to be born, not in Nazareth, but in Bethlehem. How to get them to Bethlehem?

Caesar Augustus thinks he is in charge; after all, he is the head of the greatest power in the world, the Roman Empire. Arrogantly, he decides to conduct a census for taxation purposes, no matter the hardship it imposes on people. Thus, Joseph and Mary must report to Joseph’s family’s home in Bethlehem.

Taxes were essential for the maintenance of the Roman Peace or Domination, depending on your perspective. For Joseph and Mary and the Jewish people, it was not a time of peace but of oppression and depression. They were at the mercy of a foreign power that enforced its will at the point of sword and spear and resistance was futile.

So, when Caesar says go, they must go! But little does Augustus know he is acting on God’s behalf; he has no clue that he is playing a part in God’s plan to fulfill Micah’s prophecy and get Jesus to his proper birthplace in Bethlehem.

So, Caesar thinks he is in charge, but Luke paints a picture that what was going on was beyond his control; he was merely an agent of God who needed to get Jesus’ birth moved from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the city of David, where God’s messiah was to come from. God uses Caesar to accomplish God’s intent.

Our story is a declaration that the powerful leader of the great Roman Empire is not in charge, is not a god, and is not the source of good news. God is in charge and is all about being with us, and we can see this through the eyes of faith, which is good news.

So, we have a young, expecting couple nearing the time of birth who are forced by Imperial greed to make a journey from Nazareth to Joseph’s family home in Bethlehem, where they will stay with Joseph’s relatives.

As I reminded us last year, Joseph and Mary are at Joseph’s relatives when the time of the birth comes.

You may know a different story: this story. When Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem, there was no room for them in the Holiday Inn, and, as we learned from a multitude of Christmas pageants, the heartless innkeeper turned them away. Or perhaps the kind innkeeper, having a good heart, put them up in a stable or cave where the animals slept. Poor baby Jesus, Mary, and Joseph all alone with just some animals. There is no easy way to say this other than it is just not Biblical.

The Greek word that many Bibles translate as “inn”, like our text tonight, as in “there was no room in the inn”, is better translated as “guest room”. This is the same word used for the upper room where Jesus ate the last supper with his disciples. So, when Mary and Joseph arrive, and it is time for her birth, there is just no room in the guest room; it is full.

So, they laid Jesus in a manger or feeding trough in the family room because there was no room in the guest room. This makes perfect sense with the importance of family and hospitality; there was always room for more, and they would make do. It would be a matter of great shame on Joseph’s family if they couldn’t make room. It was unthinkable.

As Robert Frost said, “Home is the place where, when you have to go there, they have to take you in.” And they took in the holy family.

As Jonathan Waldrup tells us, a typical home might have a guest room (kataluma), a family room, and a “stable” area. This stable area was beneath the main level floor, so animals could come into the house at night without getting in the way of the family. This was both to protect the animals and to provide additional warmth in the house when it was cold. At the edge of the family area, where the animals’ heads would jut over into the family room, mangers or feeding troughs would be cut out for the animals to feed. The family’s animals stayed inside for safety on a lower level of the house and were fed inside from a manger or trough on the next level, where the home’s family room was. In the home’s safety, Jesus was lovingly placed in a manger in the family room of his ancestral family’s home, surrounded by his family.

Then the scene shifts to the fields and some shepherds. Why Shepherds?

At first, the angels seemed to go to the wrong people with an announcement to the shepherds. Indeed, with the appearance of the divine heavenly host, the shepherds are filled with fear, but the angel tells them not to fear. “God has good news for you.”

The angels do not go to the political or religious leaders. It is not to Herod or the priests or Caesar or the scribes. They don’t splash the news on social media; they go, as the song declares, to certain poor shepherds. Many scholars think Shepherds were grouped with sinners and tax collectors in those days. They were considered the bottom rung of society. They were the wrong sort of people for this astounding, glorious news. And that makes sense.

The shepherds were the wrong sort of people to receive cosmic good news, **which made them just the right sort.** They were at the bottom rung of society and could not find honest work. As one author describes them, they were liars, degenerates, and thieves whose testimony was inadmissible in court and who were often barred from various towns. They were religiously unclean. They were looked down upon. Yet with all that against them, God comes to them and chooses them and blesses them to be the first to hear the good news of the Birth of Jesus.

The people who have given up on religion and whom the religious have given up on are the first to hear that a savior is born. God loves the shepherds and gifts them with the good news of a glorious birth and the good news that God is with us. If they can receive it, anyone who has an open heart can.

Moreover, those whom society calls sinners receive the good news that they, too, are beloved of God and that God is pleased with them and us.

God loves us so much that God has taken on our flesh and become one with us in the form of a newborn, vulnerable, and dependent. God comes to be with us in an approachable way, not in some overwhelming power play or capricious decree. The heavenly host is frightening; a baby is inviting. God comes as a baby that we can all approach. Before he is the adult Jesus, he is first a tiny one who reveals God’s love for us by coming to dwell with us.

And remember, all those who are called names and oppressed by the powerful are beloved of God and need to be treated so. A message we so need today. Savor that for a moment; God is very pleased with us, with you. As I said last Sunday, men crave the blessing of their father, but even more, we crave a divine blessing, though some may have given up any hope, and that is true today.

So, blessed with good news, the shepherds hurry off to see what they have heard. But when they arrive, they are no longer outcasts but part of this family, Jesus’ family. A family of more than blood, a family of Love. A family we are

invited to join. The shepherds are part of the family of God, and so are we. We, too, are part of that family when we are on top of the world and down and out.

They are so excited to share the good news they have received with the holy couple.

Then Mary stores these memories in her heart and ponders them for the rest of her life. And the Shepherds, touched by God's love, go out glorifying God.

This is just what we should do: ponder this story of God's love and share it with others. The story ends as it begins with a logistics issue: how are we going to get the word out that Emmanuel, God, is with us? How will we glorify God and God's gift to us? That is what our faith is all about: God loves us and is pleased with us, and God loves the world as well and wishes to bring it back home. And God does this through the gift of holy love, which says, "Emmanuel: God is with us." This is good news, believe it.