

It has all come together. All the planning, all the preparation, all the anticipation. Finally, Christmas is here. Christmas is here and all of creation smiles at God's loving presence made manifest in a helpless baby.

Episcopalians love Christmas and rightly so. The significance of this simple story encourages us to enhance our celebrations with poetry and pageantry. The Christmas season amplifies our awareness and heightens our emotions. And rightly so. We sit together here in the eternal presence of God. All that went on up until today happened *before* Christmas and everything that happens from this moment on happens *after* Christ.

And we sit together here in the eternal *now* of God who became one of us in Jesus Christ. And yet Christmas is often a time when we either look back at how we recall life used to be or we look forward at how we imagine life is supposed to be. Some of us are delighted to be reunited with family or friends for a time, and there are new babies or new relationships for others. Some of us are acutely aware of empty chairs at the table where loved ones once sat. Many of us are living in some combination of laughter and tears. Regardless, we do love this season, with all the expectations and distresses; all the history and all the promise; all the memories and all the mystery.

Maybe that's why we look forward to hearing an old story retold at Christmas. A story with glorious angels and lowly shepherds, romance and hardships, earthly emperors and all the grandeur of God's glory. Many of those who make Christmas their one annual church visit come just to be with family or old friends. Yet the story is still familiar, even if they only remember the version that Linus tells in the Peanuts Christmas special. Others have heard Luke's Christmas story at church since early childhood.

In any case, over the years our familiarity with the story has tamed some aspects and romanticized others. The repetition of Luke's Christmas story has caused many of us hear some of the most jolting parts of the story as quite routine. Other parts of the story that were actually rather commonplace, we have made unnecessarily and inaccurately dramatic. Fortunately, we can renew our hearing of the story in a way that recaptures the wonder of that which is around us and within us; his name is Emmanuel—God who is with us.

Let me show you what I mean.

For starters, Luke's story of the birth of Jesus does not open with miraculous, other-worldly signs like other ancient literature about the divine

breaking through into the human world. In what was once a surprising opening, Luke sets the scene with a tedious bureaucratic decree from the Emperor Augustus that all people should be registered—counted, that is, so that taxes due to Rome could be calculated and charged. Tax season—that is what motivates Joseph and his pregnant fiancé, Mary, to return to his hometown of Bethlehem.

Luke's Holy Family, in this sense, is very much like our own families—subject to the sometimes inconvenient demands of larger politics and economics that are beyond our personal control. But unlike the Holy Family, we have lost sight of the more sinister characteristic of the Emperor's order. Undoubtedly, Luke's first-century audience would have caught the implications of the census.

The call for registration was a penetrating symbol of Roman power and a reminder to non-Romans of the subordination required of them. More than simply gathering useful information, the census signified an earthly rule that sought to threaten Jewish fidelity to YHWH. Luke does not intend to set the nativity at a specific date in history by opening with the decree and a reference to the governor of Syria. Luke's purpose is to set this story within the context of the Roman subjugation that the conquered Israelites experienced under Roman rule.

As the church began to take on more and more earthly status and power, this context became a little more complicated. Certainly by the time of the King James translation of the Bible, the church was allowing responsibility for the hardship to relocate to the oppressed. The church allowed a certain blaming of the victim until we no longer felt the pinch of Rome's oppression on the Holy Family. Instead, we picture Joseph and his pregnant fiancé walking from inn to inn where no one will give them a room, until finally, they stumble into a barn or a cave where Mary finally gives birth.

As romantic as that scene has become, there were no "inns" in first century Middle Eastern villages, at least not like we imagine them to be. Luke's earlier listeners would have pictured something very different. Keep in mind that Joseph was a direct descendant from the house of David. The Orthodox claim that Mary's family also had connections to the royal family, although slightly more distant. For *anyone* in "the city of David called Bethlehem" to turn away descendants of David would be unimaginable, and even so, it is highly improbable that Joseph took his family door-to-door at various strangers' businesses. He would have taken his family to a relative's home.

Most homes in Bethlehem and the Upper Galilee had only two rooms. One room was exclusively for guests. That room was frequently at the end of the house highest up a hillside or up on the roof. Consequently, it came to be called “the upper room.” The Greek word has been translated as “inn,” but the word in Luke’s Gospel that refers to a guest room is not the same word that refers to a commercial establishment like the one where the Good Samaritan put up the wounded man. There was no room in the upper room, the guest room, for Mary and Joseph because it was already full of family guests.

The other room was for family, where the entire family cooked, ate and slept. Typically, the end of the room nearest the door was a few feet lower than the rest of the family room floor. Simple village homes in Palestine did not have the luxury of storehouses nor barns. At night, people brought their animals into the lower part of the family room to keep them safe and to provide warmth. They cut small troughs into the stone or made them from wood, and positioned these at edge of the living space just above the animals. With a bit of fresh hay, they made rather cozy bassinets for all peasant families, whose babies would have been surrounded by family sleeping on their own straw mats.

And so rather than being born into shameful, cold and lonely squalor, Jesus and his family had been invited into the warm space of a gracious host family. That’s the atmosphere embracing the Holy Family when the drama of childbirth took place. The preparation and aroma of shared meals, the squabbles and conversations of in-laws and relatives, the day-to-day work that went on with a houseful of guests. Maybe some of you recognize some of this?

That is the same atmosphere that the shepherds came upon, where they were greeted by the family. The honor of the entire community was on display with the arrival of the shepherds, who no doubt feared what they would encounter on their quest to see a baby of such promise. But what they met was a baby, wrapped in the same way they wrapped their own newly born, in the arms of a loving family in an ordinary peasant home. The shepherds met an extended family providing for a couple who have just given birth in a small village where family have gathered from afar. The care and attention they witnessed only confirmed their praise for the peace promised by the arrival of the baby.

Luke’s story, to put it shortly, is about average people, regular Joes and Marys, living in turbulent economic and violent political times who have found a way to extend hospitality anyway. A story about fairly average families who struggle in some of the ways that you and I still do to keep sometimes stormy lives intact.

Maybe that's why, given the reality of the world around us, we turn to the church for a vision of something that is inherently and undeniably good, pure and beautiful. Maybe we come expecting something spectacular and earth-shattering. Maybe we come looking for certainty, order or security. But consistently, God is born again and again in real human lives—lives much like ours—lives, that is, complete with order *and* chaos, certainty *and* doubt, togetherness *and* brokenness.

So when we sing “How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given” or when we sing “silent night, holy night, all is calm, all is bright,” we sing these words trusting that the silent gift is in the holy mystery of an unexceptional birth in a small town. Not in the fanfare of a royal birth. Not in some spectacular shower of fireworks, but in the quietness of our human lives *now*, just as they actually are.

We sit together here in the silence of God's eternal *now* with our hopes and fears, with our dreams and disappointments, with our deepest love and our most painful grief. We come together with the truest things about ourselves among friends and family in the silent mystery of the Word made flesh, a mystery nestled among the beautiful chaos of our lives just as they are. If you will but take this opportunity to hear the Christmas story with fresh ears, there is a gift for you that is inherently and undeniably good, pure and beautiful—the astonishing gift of God's joy, comfort and peace promised by the smile of a newborn baby.