

Christmas Day 2008

Welcome Everyone

Today we will re-tell the Christmas Story and try to add a little background history and maybe some geography with commentary by Paul L. Maier Prof. at Western Michigan, to help us get a deeper appreciation and understanding of the events that First Christmas. But first let us begin with prayer.

Dear Lord, as we look again at the story of your birth, open our hearts and send your Holy Spirit to fill us with knowledge and understanding of the real meaning of Christmas. Amen.

To help us get into the Christmas spirit, we begin by singing: **“Oh Come All Ye Faithful” vv.1,4**

Our tour guide for our trip back in time today will be Luke (author of the third book in the New Testament).

Antioch (in what is today Syria) or Phillippi are among the places suggested as his home.

Luke was probably a gentile by birth, well educated in Greek culture, a physician by profession, and a loyal companion of the Apostle Paul.

Before Paul ended up in Rome, he spent 2 years in confinement at Caesarea. During this time Luke most likely visited Jerusalem to learn from the elders and the Apostles, all the many facts about Jesus, which the gifted Greek would later use to write the Gospel bearing his name. He must also have had special interviews with Mary the mother of Jesus, who was presumably staying with John at Jerusalem. This would explain Luke’s crucial portrayal of the Christmas Story, details that only Mary would know.

Let us now go to Luke’s account as found in the second chapter of His Gospel.

Read vs. 1-5: And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria. And all went to be taxed, every one to his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem because he was of the house and lineage of David. To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

Sing: “Oh Little Town Of Bethlehem” vv.1,4

The first person mentioned in this story is not a Jew but a Roman who, 1500 miles away, decided to take a census or enrollment to see how many people he has in his empire. In doing so a very pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph end up going to Bethlehem to have their baby instead of

Nazareth as they planned.

What route they chose for their trip south is not known. It could well have been the central route via the valleys winding through the hills of Samaria, which was the shortest. On the other hand, if the pious Joseph wanted to avoid any contact with the Samaritans or wished to keep Mary warm during that chilly time of the year, he could have chosen an alternate route south-east across the Plain of Esdraelon, down the Jordan River valley as far as Jericho, and then up to Jerusalem and Bethlehem.

Since Jericho lies 825 feet below sea level near the Dead Sea, and Jerusalem is perched on the hilly backbone of Palestine some 2500 feet above sea level, the statement “up to Jerusalem” is quite literally true. In either case, the eighty or ninety-mile trip would be difficult for Mary, but she would soon forget the pain in joy at the extraordinary thing about to happen to her. The birth of any baby is a marvel in itself, but that of a divine baby, as she firmly believed hers to be, was even more incredible.

It is almost certain that Mary and Joseph reached Bethlehem in the late afternoon or early evening. If they had arrived earlier lodging would not have been so difficult to find, although Bethlehem would have been crowded enough with the many descendants of King David returning to register at their ancestral home.

Picture Joseph going from door to door desperately begging for shelter because Mary was in labor, maybe it was the Innkeeper’s wife who felt sorry for them and suggested the cave beneath the inn where the animals were kept. Grateful for any refuge in the crisis of his wife’s labor pains, Joseph carefully led the donkey and its precious burden down the steep path on the east side of the inn to the cave below it.

Read Vs: 6 & 7: And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her first-born son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

Sing: “Away in a Manger”

From all accounts of the Nativity, it seems that no one assisted Mary at the birth of Jesus--not even Joseph, for husbands were not to play the role of midwives. Self-delivery was by no means uncommon at the time. The Hebrew women, unlike neighboring mothers, prided themselves on delivering their babies rather easily and were quite able to take care of themselves in the absence of a midwife. Although physicians and midwives were also regularly used, Luke simply tells us that Mary gave birth to her first-born son, wrapped him in long swaddling bands, and laid him in a feeding trough, which must have had the sweet, grainy smell of hay, barley, and oats.

And so the incredible paradox happened at Bethlehem: History's greatest figure was born, not in a palace or mansion, but in a cavern stable. For Mary and Joseph the holiest moment of all must have come before the shepherds paid their famous visit as they gazed at the extraordinary baby. Whose mission they could scarcely comprehend.

Read Vs 8-20: And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things, which were told them by the shepherds. But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them

Sing: It Came Upon the Midnight Clear"

All Bethlehem must have rustled with news about "that poor girl from Galilee" who had no sooner arrived in town than she bore a child, since the shepherds and later, the Magi had no trouble finding the Holy Family. Clearly, the town's people must have directed them.

Message:

To help bring this Christmas story home let me take you back a few years to the birth of one of our granddaughters. She was born in the afternoon of December 23. We were able to get there about two hours after she was born. That worked out great because mother and baby were all cleaned up and resting. As we walked into their

room her mother asked if we wanted to hold her? Of course Ruth went first and then it was my turn. I forgot how small a newborn baby is even if they aren't premature. My hands are not overly large but she fit in both my hands.

A little over 24 hours later we were in church for Christmas Eve. You see our daughter-in-law told her doctor she was not going to miss her two older children's first ever Christmas program. They were both in preschool part of the program. What a thrill for us as grandparents to also be there for this milestone in their lives.

As I sat there, in that old country church, listening to the Christmas story once again, it suddenly took on new meaning. **A newborn baby that's how it started.** I thought of Mary, a very young mother, holding her newborn baby. A baby, so new, and used to being fed internally, that he didn't know what it meant to be hungry. A baby so fragile he had to be kept warm, on that chilly night as they stayed in the cave with the animals. A baby who needed changing when he messed his cloths, baby who could do absolutely nothing for himself.

As I sat there holding the newborn, all of a sudden the words from the Gospel of John hit me like a lighting bolt. **In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that was made.** And in verse 14 **The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.** That tells me the helpless newborn baby Mary was holding was there at the creation of the world.

He created all things that were, are, and ever will be, including his mother who was holding him. Now that will blow your mind! That is impossible for our human minds to ever grasp.

So we ask the questions: "Mary did you know"? Mary did you know that this child you delivered would one day deliver you? Did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation and He will one day rule the nations? Did you know that this baby once walked where angel trod? And when you kiss your little baby you kiss the face of God? Did you know that your baby boy is Heaven's perfect lamb? This sleeping child you're holding is **The Great I AM?**

As the shepherds left and Mary stood holding the baby I doubt she understood any more than we do. Luke tells us in the second chapter of his Gospel that Mary pondered all these things in her heart. Not once but twice he makes this statement. I don't think Mary fully understood until the Holy Spirit came at Pentecost then she and all the rest of the believers understood what had happened in their lives.

Zion Lutheran church, in Fairbanks, does an ice sculpture every year. I wish they had left the one they did some 15 years ago in its original form. You see they

took the baby right from the manger and put it right on the cross. Some of the members thought it looked too gorse so it was changed. But that is the whole reason for Christmas! That is exactly why that little baby was born! God became human so He could do what you and I could not do, namely keep the law perfectly and take our place on the cross. That baby was born to die. Yes you and I will someday also die, but that baby had a choice. He did not have to die. He willingly chose to die for you and for me. Be assured as you go through life Jesus is walking with you holding your hand. And when you say “but Jesus you just don’t understand,” He can say, “yes I do, I too was human and I know exactly what you are going through.” And when we look at Jesus and say, “I’m sorry I really do not deserve all you have done for me,” He says, with a smile on His face, “I know but if it were necessary I would do it all over again just for you.”

And so ends our Christmas story. Or does it? NO this is only the beginning. From Christmas Eve we go to Epiphany and to Lent and to Easter and to Pentecost, and the wonder is that it all began with a baby’s cry. God has come to Earth in human flesh and blood. He has come to bring salvation and give us new life. That is the real Christmas story, the story of God’s saving grace in His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Prayer:

Dear God, as you have shattered the dark night of sin with the birth of the light of the world, help us to be like the shepherds and tell all we meet the wonderful news that you have sent your Son to take our place under the law so we may live with you forever. Amen

Offering: “Mary did you know”

Confession:

All: Lord God, the shepherds heard the message of the angels and went with haste to Bethlehem to worship Him. After they worshiped Him, they went out to witness to what they had seen. Unfortunately, there are times when our worship takes a back seat to other priorities that we have in life. Many times, our witness is woefully inadequate and at times misleading. Forgive us, for Jesus' sake. Fill us with Your Word and grace today and lead us as we live our lives as Your witnesses.

Leader: When the goodness and loving kindness of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according

to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and renewal of the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that being justified by his grace we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life. Holy people, redeemed of the Lord, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son + and of the Holy Spirit.

LORDS Prayer:

Consecration:

Communion:

Prayer:

Leader: Blessed are You, Lord of heaven and earth, for You have had mercy on Your creation and sent Your Son to live among us and die for the sins of the world so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life. As You sent the joyful message of His birth to the shepherds, You sent it to us also. We thank You for the gift of forgiveness that comes to us through Jesus Christ. Send us out into our world, guided by Your Holy Spirit to tell what we have seen, heard and experienced as He comes to us in His body and blood.

People: Amen.

Benediction:

Pastor: Arise, shine, for your light has come,

People: and the glory of the LORD rises upon you.

Pastor: See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the people,

People: but the LORD rises upon you and His glory appears over you.

Pastor: The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make His face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor, and give you peace.

People: Amen.

Sing: "Joy to the World" vv 1,4