

Sermon follow-up

12/25/11

“The Infinite Infant: Celebrating the Birth of the Baby Who Rocked the Word” (Luke 2:1-20)

Rich Lusk

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Philip Cary on Christmas:

Think of how Christmas has gotten to be a consumer holiday. What we now call Christmas is mostly stuff the Grinch could easily steal: the presents, the ribbons, the wrappings. (Dr. Suess, the author of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, is one of my heroes, because his book asks such a great question: do we have anything left to sing about on Christmas if the presents have all been taken away?) Yet it's a safe bet that most Christians in America would feel far more guilty if they neglected their Christmas shopping than if they failed to go to church on Christmas. We feel less obligation to sing praises to the newborn king than we do to get everybody their presents. That's just how it is for us in our culture: we take it for granted that we *have* to buy Christmas presents, whereas the responsibility to join other Christian in worship does not get the nearly so powerful a grip on our hearts. And we hardly notice this has happened—that consumerism has gotten a larger share of our hearts than our own religion. That's one measure of its cultural power. (*Good News for Anxious Christians*, 118)

Of course, that doesn't make feasting and gift-giving wrong, as Steve Wilkins explains

(<http://auburnavenue.wordpress.com/2011/12/22/shopping-and-the-true-meaning-of-christmas/>):

Well, having already riled up a number of esteemed brethren, let us see if we can keep up the momentum! So, today, class, we shall make our target those (well-meaning) Christians who

think that Christmas gift-giving distracts us from the True Meaning of Christmas <sup>TM</sup>.

You hear it every year, don't you? We're warned against the "commercialization" of Christmas and exhorted to reject it so that we can get back to the *true* Reason for the Season <sup>TM</sup>. We spend too much money. Shopping for others brings stress and anxiety and hustle and bustle and worry and drives you crazy! Why can't we just love one another and forget the gifts and just spend time around the fireplace thinking warm thoughts of love and gentleness, sipping hot chocolate, and enjoying some simple, home-made gifts (which are far more meaningful than anything you could possibly buy from one of those greedy merchants at the mall or online)?

That's the spirit I'm talking about. You've heard it, right? Ok.

First, though, let's acknowledge that there are real sins connected with our celebrations that we need to be mindful of and avoid:

- Do many people spend more than they can afford on gifts and sin by going into unnecessary debt? You betcha.
- Do we have a problem with materialism in our culture? Indeed we do.
- Do we often think that money and things can bring happiness and contentment? Yep.
- Do we fall into the trap of focusing more upon the hassle and the expense of gift-giving than we do upon the privilege of giving? Absolutely.
- Should we spend more time together with loved ones and work on building our relationships and loving one another? Of course.
- Should we remember that there are many people in need of basic necessities and have compassion on them instead of always focusing upon ourselves? Absolutely, we must never forget the needs of those around us — mercy and justice demand it.

But acknowledging all that, the message we often hear gives this impression: "Giving unnecessary and expensive gifts to friends and family is a waste of money. It encourages selfishness, covetousness, materialism and indifference to

others and is a great dishonor to God.”

The implication is that one of the solutions to covetousness, selfishness, and materialism is to quit giving gifts and cut back on the size of our celebration — otherwise it’s impossible to avoid these sins.

But is this true? Let me pose another question: If you’re tithing and being generous with the wealth God has given you (remembering those in need), is it wrong to spend your money on gifts and celebration? Is it wrong to give something that is not absolutely necessary for sustaining life? Like a toy rocket ship or truck or a video game, or another pair of shoes, or a new shirt or a hilarious tie? Is it wrong to spend money on special treats and an unusually large dinner? Some of our friends would say, “Yes. Yes it is, absolutely!”

The problem here, however, is that God says, “No. No, it isn’t wrong, absolutely not!” If you’re tithing, being generous, showing compassion to those in need, then there’s absolutely nothing wrong with feasting, gift-giving, celebrating, and spending money for these “unnecessary” things.

Indeed, God commanded Israel to do this very thing, right? (Deut. 14:22-27 “You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year. 23 And you shall eat before the LORD your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always. 24 But if the journey is too long for you, so that you are not able to carry the tithe, or if the place where the LORD your God chooses to put His name is too far from you, when the LORD your God has blessed you, 25 then you shall exchange it for money, take the money in your hand, and go to the place which the LORD your God chooses.”).

It’s not clear exactly how this was to work, but scholars think that at least four out of every seven years, God expected Israel to do this. And notice: The rule for determining what you obtained with your money was not what you *needed* but what you *desired*. And you were not to be concerned about the amount. You were to purchase as much as your tithe allowed.

Which, for some, would have amounted to quite a bit of stuff.

It's impossible to know the average income of the average Israelite, so let's just put it in terms that we can understand. What if you were to spend a tithe of your income for a celebration? What would my friends think if they heard I spent \$3000-4000 for Christmas? Would they be dismayed? Would you? It sounds like gross extravagance, like something that can only lead to evil, right?

But notice why the Lord wanted Israel to do this (v. 23 "that you may learn to fear the LORD your God always."). This extravagant celebration was to teach them to fear Yahweh. That's the same phrase used to explain why they should read the law publicly every seven years (Deut. 31:10-13).

God puts celebration and feasting on the same level as hearing His Word. Why? In part because the celebration itself was made possible by God's goodness and generosity. They had something to celebrate with only because God had been generous to them in giving them strength and skill and blessing their labors. And every year when they ate and drank and enjoyed the abundance of good things that they probably couldn't afford during the rest of the year -- they were reminded of God's extravagant grace and mercy to them. And the experience of His goodness and generosity would in turn make them generous people. They would fear Him and grow in conformity to Him.

God wasn't afraid that they would become covetous and materialistic. The covetous man doesn't have any desire to spend his money for others. The materialist has no regard for the joy he might bring to others with his wealth. This grand celebration was to teach them to see the ugliness of covetousness and materialism and to attack these evils.

And, you know what? A joyful, generous celebration of Christmas (and other feast days) will do the same for us.

Do you see how this works? Our giving is to reflect God's generosity to us. The man who is always concerned that he's going to spend a penny more than is absolutely necessary or that he's going to give more than he needs to give, is not

showing the spirit of the Savior. He's not loving like Jesus loves at all. Rather, we show forth the glory of God by being generous to others and sometimes by being extravagantly generous — just like He is toward us.

God gives us many, many things that are not absolutely *necessary* for life. He supplies all our needs but then gives us far above all that we can ask or think. And He never worries about spending too much on us. Does His abundance make you spoiled, arrogant, and demanding? Or does it rather humble you and make you ashamed of your selfishness and self-centeredness and pettiness and stinginess?

You see? God doesn't attack consumerism and materialism by being stingy with His gifts or restricting the number of them because He's afraid that you will become a selfish pig. Rather, He lavishes His gifts upon you so that you will learn to be like Him.

Christmas is a time when we have the privilege of imitating the gloriously generous, loving God who has given us the most precious of gifts and all other things with Him.

So rejoice, be glad, eat, drink, and be truly merry — for the Lord is good. He has given us His Son . . . and the turkey and the pecan pie and that funny sweater Aunt Suzie thought was "darling" — give thanks and enjoy it all so that you can become like the Lord of love, joy, and gladness.

But we do have to keep priorities straight. With Christmas Day landing on a Sunday this year, many Christians are choosing to stay home and open presents with family rather than go to church for worship. How can we say we're celebrating Christ's birth if we stay home and give presents to each other, but refuse to gather with other Christians to give Christ the gifts of thanks and praise? This is just consumerism and familism run amok, it a uniquely American form of idolatry, but it must be challenged. Again, Wilkins is helpful (<http://auburnavenue.wordpress.com/2011/12/21/family-time/>):

I keep saying that I'm not surprised by anything I hear that Christians have done nowadays — and then just about every week I hear of something that some Christian (or church) has done and I'm flabbergasted. Again.

Apparently, the fact that Christmas falls on Sunday this year has flummoxed a number of churches. One of which put out a video to explain to their congregation the reason why they had changed their normal practice this Sunday. The pastor says, the leadership team was stumped at first. You have to do “something on Christmas” he tells us. But they couldn’t figure out what. So, after a lot of discussion, they came up with the idea of doing . . . next to nothing. They’re going to leave the church open so that their members can come by and have a time of quiet meditation. There might even be Bible reading and prayer and singing of some Christmas carols, he says, they’re not quite sure how it will all work — but this will, he says, make Christmas “special.”

Nowhere in the video does he indicate that, you know, we might just *worship* on this Sunday like we do every other Sunday! Worship apparently isn’t “special” enough.

Then I hear that a number of Christians are planning to stay home from worship this Sunday so that they can celebrate Christmas. Yeah. I hope that sounds a tad whacky to you! John Barach makes this point to show the stupidity of this:

Would you skip someone’s birthday party and refuse to come to his house or eat any of his birthday cake and then tell him that you did all of that in order to honor him on his birthday? No? Then why would anyone skip church on Sunday in order to celebrate Christ’s birth?

This is akin to those who say they’re not going to worship in order to “have family time.”

We need to ask the question, “Who is your family?”

Jesus actually had the opportunity to answer this question one day. Remember when He was in Capernaum teaching and healing, he was told that his mother and brothers wanted to speak to him. Jesus used this as an opportunity to give some important instruction (Matt. 12:48-50): “But He answered and said to the one who told Him, “Who is My mother and who are My brothers?” 49 And He stretched out His hand toward His disciples and said, “Here are My mother and My brothers! 50 For whoever does the will of My Father in heaven is My



brother and sister and mother.”

Jesus points out that His first and most important family consists of all those who do the will of His father. They all are closer to Him than His own mother and brothers would be if they did not believe and obey. God’s family is our first and most important family. It turns out that the water of baptism is in fact thicker than blood.

Everyone supposedly wants all of us to remember “the *reason* for the season” but I don’t think a lot of them understand the *Reason* as well as they think they do. If we are celebrating Christmas because of Jesus’ incarnation then we are acknowledging that His coming and His life, death, resurrection, ascension, and reign are the most important things in the world. *Nothing* is more important than what God has done in and through His Son. And how has God told us chiefly to commemorate His Son’s coming, life, and work?

It’s NOT to be done by forsaking public worship of His Son so that you can spend time with your private family. My first family is not the Wilkins. My first family is not the Hilburns or the Pages or the Thompsons. My first and most important family is my baptismal family and our lives and schedules must reflect this by making worship a priority for the Wilkinses, and the Pages, and the Thompsons, and Hilburns and every other family. Public worship is “family time.”

Don’t make rules for your family that contradict the rules Jesus makes for us. Worship is the most important thing we do for our individual families. The *best* thing you can ever do for your children is to teach them that there is nothing, *nothing*, more important than worshiping God with His people on Sunday. If they learn this lesson, your family will be mightily blessed — and they will be blessed because they have learned that our individual families are secondary to the Family of God.

Don’t forsake the worship in some mistaken idea that doing so will help your family more than attending worship with God’s family. It’s just not so.

So, I’ll look forward to seeing you this Sunday.

And, may the Lord grant to you a most merry Christmas!

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Heaven opened when the angels met the shepherds. It's interesting how much this theme of heaven opening shows up in Advent and Christmas hymnody, e.g.:

- "O Come O Come Emmanuel" – "Key of David come and open wide our heavenly home"
- "Good Christian Men Rejoice" – "he hath opened heaven's door"
- "While Shepherds Watched Their Flocks" – "good will henceforth from heaven to men, begin and never cease"
- "All Praise to Thee Eternal Lord" – "forlorn and lowly is thy birth, that we may rise from heaven to earth...to make us, in the realms divine, like thine own angels round thee shine"
- "Once in Royal David's City" – "for that child so dear and gentle is our Lord in heaven above and he leads his children on to the place where he is gone"
- "Thou Who Wast Rich Beyond All Splendor" – "stooping so low but sinners raising, heavenward by thine eternal plan"

These hymns just reinforce the point made in the sermon. The lowly shepherds are types and representatives of all God's people. The shepherds are given access to heaven, which is now the privilege of all Christians in union with Christ (Heb. 4, 10, 12). In Christ, we are priests with access to the shekinah-glory and throne room-sanctuary of heaven.

Many Christmas hymns also move straight from his birth to his death, which also fits well with the another theme in the sermon, namely, the way Luke's birth narrative foreshadows the passion narrative.

The trajectory of Christmas points to the cross. In other words, the event of Christmas already contained within it the event of Good Friday. The initial humiliation of entering our world and our humanity in such a lowly condition was just the first downward step in a life of downward mobility. Donald MacLeod captures this well:

In becoming incarnate God not only accommodates himself to human weakness: he buries his glory under veil after veil so



that it is impossible for flesh and blood to recognize him. As he hangs on the cross, bleeding, battered, powerless and forsaken, the last thing he looks like is God. Indeed, he scarcely looks human. He looks like nothing but a hell-bound, hell-deserving derelict. Everything about him says, "An atheist and a blasphemer!" . . .

We should notice, too, that the *kenōsis* involved the willingness to go ever lower. Behind it, there lay two great decisions. The first, pre-temporal, was a decision of the eternal Son to assume the form of a servant in the likeness of men. Second, taken once he was incarnate, was the decision to humble himself even further.

From this point of view, the humiliation of Christ was not a point, but a line. Its greatest single step was that by which he became the child in the manger. The condescension involved in that is beyond imagining. Yet it was only the beginning of the long downward journey through homelessness, poverty, exhaustion, shame and pain to Gethsemane; and beyond that to Calvary. . . .

Every moment in that journey from Bethlehem to Calvary was chosen; and every moment on the cross, from the third to the ninth hour, was chosen. Every day of the Lord's life he re-enacted the *kenōsis*, renewing the decision which had made him nothing and choosing to move further and further into the shame and pain it involved. He loved his own, and when eventually it became clear what that love would cost he went forward, trembling, to be what his people's sin deserved. [*The Person of Christ*, 218].

John Donne makes the same point:

The whole life of Christ was a continual Passion; others die Martyrs, but Christ was born a Martyr. . . . His birth and his death were but one continual act, and his Christmas-day and his Good Friday, are but the evening and morning of one and the same day.

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Charles Spurgeon on Christmas feasting:

Feast, Christians, feast; you have a right to feast. Go to the house of feasting to-morrow, celebrate your Saviour's birth; do not be ashamed to be glad; you have a right to be happy. Solomon says, "Go thy way, eat thy bread with joy, and drink thy wine with a merry heart; for God now accepteth thy works. Let thy garments be always white; and let thy head lack no ointment.

"Religion never was designed to make your pleasures less."

Recollect that your Master ate butter and honey. Go your way, rejoice tomorrow, but in your feasting, think of the Man in Bethlehem; let him have a place in your hearts, give him the glory, think of the virgin who conceived him, but think most of all of the Man born, the Child given.

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Some more Christmas quotations:

Jonathan Edwards:

His infinite condescension marvelously appeared in the manner of his birth. He was brought forth in a stable because there was no room for them in the inn. The inn was taken up by others, that were looked upon as persons of greater account.

The Blessed Virgin, being poor and despised, was turned or shut out. Though she was in such necessitous circumstances, yet those that counted themselves her betters would not give place to her; and therefore, in the time of her travail, she was forced to betake herself to a stable; and when the child was born, it was wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger. There Christ lay a little infant, and there he eminently appeared as a lamb.

But yet this feeble infant, born thus in a stable, and laid in a manger, was born to conquer and triumph over Satan, that roaring lion. He came to subdue the mighty powers of darkness, and make a show of them openly, and so to restore peace on earth, and to manifest God's good-will towards men, and to bring glory to God in the highest, according as the end of his birth was declared by the joyful songs of the glorious hosts of angels appearing to the shepherds at the same time

that the infant lay in the manger; whereby his divine dignity was manifested.

John Piper:

The aim of God at Christmas is to make the goodies of the world lose all their attraction in comparison to the surpassing glory of the divine Name. The essence of Christmas purity is not what you stand against, but what you stand in awe of, the glorious name of God.

John Piper:, on the reasons for which Jesus came, and thus the divine rationale for the incarnation:

1. "For this I was born and for this I have come into the world, to bear witness to the truth" ([John 18:37](#)).
2. "The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" ([1 John 3:8](#); cf. [Hebrews 2:14–15](#)).
3. "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners" ([Mark 2:17](#)).
4. "The Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost" ([Luke 19:10](#)).
5. "The Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" ([Mark 10:45](#)).
6. "God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" ([Galatians 4:5](#)).
7. "For God so loved the world that whoever believes on him shall not perish but have everlasting life. For God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world but that the world through him might be saved" ([John 3:16](#)).
8. "God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him" ([1 John 4:9](#)).
9. "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly" ([John 10:10](#)).
10. "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against . . . that the thoughts of many may be revealed" ([Luke 2:34ff](#)).
11. "He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" ([Luke 4:18](#)).

12. "Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God's truthfulness, in order to confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy" ([Romans 15:7-8](#); cf. [John 12:27ff](#)).

John Chrysostom from one of the oldest Christmas sermons we have:

What shall I say! And how shall I describe this Birth to you? For this wonder fills me with astonishment. The Ancient of days has become an infant. He Who sits upon the sublime and heavenly Throne, now lies in a manger. And He Who cannot be touched, Who is simple, without complexity, and incorporeal, now lies subject to the hands of men. He Who has broken the bonds of sinners, is now bound by an infant's bands. But He has decreed that ignominy shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and total humiliation the measure of His Goodness.

Wes Baker on Mal. 4:2, the date of Christmas, and the meaning of Christmas:

The most common efforts to calculate the date of his birth began with the conception of John the Baptist near the time of the fall equinox (just after Zechariah's ministry at the feast of Tabernacles). This led them to date Jesus' conception six months later around the time of the spring equinox, finally concluding that his birth nine months after that would have been at the time of the winter solstice. Whatever one thinks of these calculations, we can surely appreciate their efforts to pick up on the symbolism of this verse. In the dead of winter, at the winter solstice, when all looks bleak and dreary and hopeless the sun actually reverses course and begins its journey back, enlightening again the northern hemisphere with its warmth and radiance. The birth of the world's true King did indeed bring light to a cold and dark world. But this verse suggests that the rays emanating from him are actually rays of righteousness and justice (the word carries both senses)--righteousness, enabling us to stand before him as judge of the living and the dead, and justice, as his calculated determination to banish all injustice and unrighteousness from the world.

Leave it to a missionary to conclude that Christmas is really about missions: It is about God's mission to save us by sending his only Son into the world, and thus it is also about our

mission to go into all the world to announce good tidings that the Sun of Righteousness has risen with healing in his wings!

Gregory of Nazianzus:

What he was he continued to be; what he was not he took to himself. In the beginning he was, uncaused; for what is the cause of God? But afterward for a cause he was born. And that cause was that you might be saved, who insult him and despise his Godhead... He was laid in a manger—but he was glorified by angels, and proclaimed by a star, and worshipped by the Magi... He was baptized as a man—but he remitted sins as God... He was tempted as man, but he conquered as God... He hungered—but he fed thousands; yea, he is the bread that gives life, and that is of heaven. He thirsted—but he cried, “If any man thirst, let him come to me and drink.”... He was wearied, but he is the rest of them that are weary and heavy-laden. He was heavy with sleep, but he walked lightly over the sea... He prays, but he hears prayer. He weeps, but he causes tears to cease. He asks where Lazarus was laid, for he was man; but he raises Lazarus, for he was God. He is sold, and very cheap... but he redeems the world, and that at a great price... As a sheep he is led to the slaughter, but he is the shepherd of Israel, and now of the whole world also. As a lamb he is silent, yet he is the Word, and is proclaimed by the voice of one crying in the wilderness. He is bruised and wounded, but he heals every disease and every infirmity. He is lifted up and nailed to the tree, but by the tree of life he restores us... He is given vinegar to drink mingled with gall. Who? He who turned the water into wine, who is the destroyer of the bitter taste, who is sweetness and altogether desired. He lays down his life, but he has power to take it again... he dies, but he gives life, and by his death destroys death. He is buried but he rises again; he goes down into hell, but he brings up the souls; he ascends to heaven, and shall come again to judge the quick and the dead.

John Calvin:

When Christ was thrown into a stable, and placed in a manger, and a lodging refused him among men, it was that heaven might be opened to us, not as a temporary lodging, but as our

eternal country and inheritance, and that angels might receive us into their abode.

Philip Schaf:

The life and character of Jesus Christ is truly the holy of holies in the history of the world. Eighteen hundred years have passed away since he appeared, in the fullness of time, on this earth to redeem a fallen race from sin and death, and to open a never-ceasing fountain of righteousness and life. The ages before him anxiously awaited his coming, as the fulfillment of the desire of all nations; the ages after him proclaim his glory, and ever extend his dominion... He is the author of the new creation; the Way, the Truth, and the Life; the Prophet, Priest, and King of regenerate humanity. He is Immanuel, God with us; the eternal Word become flesh; very God and very man in one person, the Saviour of the world. [from "The Person of Christ, The Miracle of History"]

Athanasius:

The body of the Word, then, being a real human body, in spite of its having been uniquely formed from a virgin, was of itself mortal and, like other bodies, liable to death. But the indwelling of the Word loosed it from this natural liability, so that corruption could not touch it. Thus it happened that two opposite marvels took place at once: the death of all was consummated in the Lord's body; yet, because the Word was in it, death and corruption were in the same act utterly abolished. Death there had to be, and death for all, so that the due of all might be paid. Wherefore, the Word, as I said, being Himself incapable of death, assumed a mortal body, that He might offer it as His own in place of all, and suffering for the sake of all through His union with it, " might bring to nought Him that had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might deliver them who all their lifetime were enslaved by the fear of death." Have no fears then. Now that the common Savior of all has died on our behalf, we who believe in Christ no longer die, as men died aforetime, in fulfillment of the threat of the law. That condemnation has come to an end; and now that, by the grace of the resurrection, corruption has been banished and done away, we are loosed from our mortal bodies in God's good time



for each, so that we may obtain thereby a better resurrection. Like seeds cast into the earth, we do not perish in our dissolution, but like them shall rise again, death having been brought to nought by the grace of the Savior. That is why blessed Paul, through whom we all have surety of the resurrection, says: "This corruptible must put on incorruption and this mortal must put on immortality; but when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, 'Death is swallowed up in victory. O Death, where is thy sting? O Grave, where is thy victory?'

N. T. Wright:

Something is happening before our very eyes, as we gaze upon the baby in the manger, the Word made Flesh, and reflect on what it all means.

God's gift of his own very self isn't, as people so often imagine, a kind of alien invasion, an intrusion from outside.

It is of course a matter of grace, of totally undeserved mercy, the free gift of an uncaused and overflowing love – and if you want to see what free and overflowing love looks like and feels like, (and which of us doesn't?) then read the rest of John's gospel and marvel at Jesus loving his own who were in the world and loving them to the uttermost.

But this free grace, coming to us from beyond the world, is precisely coming from the one who created the world in the first place and made it to be a place of truth, of solid reality... so that *when grace happens, truth happens*. And in the baby in the manger we see them both happening; we see them both married for ever.

In the Word made Flesh we gaze upon the glory not just of the living God, coming to us in utter love in the person of this tiny baby, but of God's design for his whole world. As St. Paul put it, God's plan from the beginning was to unite, in Christ, all things, things in heaven and things on earth.

And part of the point of Christmas is that this marriage of heaven and earth, of grace and truth, has now begun and isn't going to stop until it's complete.

Welcome to the wedding.

N. T. Wright:

The wonder of Christmas morning is that today we are summoned to look at the baby in the manger and recognise whose stamp, whose imprint, he bears. On Christmas morning we find ourselves gazing at God inside out. This baby is what you get when the stamp of divine nature leaves its exact imprint in the soft metal of a human being. Jesus is the coin that tells you whose country you are living in. Jesus is the seal that tells us whose authority the document carries. Jesus is the alphabet, Alpha and Omega, beginning and ending, Chi and Rho, the Christ, Sigma for Soter, Saviour, Tau for the cross – the letters that speak of his identity, his vocation, his victory. When the living God wants to become human, this is how he spells his name, spells it in the character, the exact imprint, of his own nature, writes it in flesh and blood, soft, vulnerable human tissue, stamps it into the innermost being of the foetus in Mary's womb, the light of the world who blinked and cried as his eyes opened to this world's light, the source of life who eagerly drank his own mother's milk. This is God inside out; O come, let us adore him. This truth is so dazzling, so nourishing, that we ourselves blink at its brightness even as we come to feed on its richness.

John Calvin:

The Lord held to this orderly plan in administering the covenant of his mercy: as the day of full revelation approached with the passing of time, the more he increased each day the brightness of its manifestation. Accordingly, at the beginning when the first promise of salvation was given to Adam it glowed like a feeble spark. Then, as it was added to, the light grew in fullness, breaking forth increasingly and shedding its radiance more widely. At last – when all the clouds were dispersed – Christ, the Sun of Righteousness, fully illumined the whole earth.

Martin Luther:

This is the chief article, which separates us from all the heathen, that you, O man, may not only learn that Christ, born of the virgin, is the Lord and Savior, but also accept the fact that he is

your Lord and Savior, that you may be able to boast in your heart: I hear the Word that sounds from heaven and says: This child who is born of the virgin is not only his mother's son. I have more than the mother's estate; he is more mine than Mary's, for he was born for me, for the angel said, "To you" is born the Savior. Then ought you to say, Amen, I thank you, dear Lord.

But then reason says: Who knows? I believe that Christ, born of the virgin, is the Lord and Savior and he may perhaps help Peter and Paul, but for me, a sinner, he was not born. But even if you believed that much, it would still not be enough, unless there were added to it the faith that he was born for you. For he was not born merely in order that I should honor the mother. This honor belongs to none except her and it is not to be despised, for the angel said, "Blessed are you among women!" [Luke 1:28]. But it must not be too highly esteemed lest one deny what is written here: "To you is born this day the Savior." He was not merely concerned to be born of a virgin; it was infinitely more than that. It was this, as she herself sings in the Magnificat: "He has helped his servant Israel" [Luke 1:54]; not that he was born of me and my virginity but born for you and for your benefit, not only for my honor.

Take yourself in hand, examine yourself and see whether you are a Christian! If you can sing: The Son, who is proclaimed to be a Lord and Savior, is my Savior; and if you can confirm the message of the angel and say yes to it and believe it in your heart, then your heart will be filled with such assurance and joy and confidence, and you will not worry much about even the costliest and best that this world has to offer. For when I can speak to the virgin from the bottom of my heart and say: O Mary, noble, tender virgin, you have borne a child; this I want more than robes and gold, yea, more than my body and life; then you are closer to the treasure than everything else in heaven and earth... You see how a person rejoices when he receives a robe or ten coins. But how many are there who shout and jump for joy when they hear the message of the angel: "To you is born this day the Savior?" Indeed, the majority look upon it as a sermon that must be preached, and when they have heard it, consider it a trifling thing, and go away just as they were before.

Dorothy Sayers (perhaps my all-time favorite Christmas quotation):

The central dogma of the Incarnation is that by which its [that is, Christianity's] relevance stands or falls. If Christ were only man, then he is irrelevant to any thought about God; if he is only God, then he is entirely irrelevant to any experience of human life....the outline of the official story—the tale of the time when God was the underdog and got beaten, when he submitted to the conditions he had laid down and became a man like the men he had made, and the men he had made broke him and killed him. This is the dogma we find so dull—this terrifying drama of which God is the victim and the hero.

If this is dull, then what, in Heaven's name, is worthy to be called exciting? The people who hanged Christ never, to do them justice, accused him of being a bore; on the contrary, they thought him too dynamic to be safe. It has been left for later generations to muffle up that shattering personality and surround him with an atmosphere of tedium. We have very efficiently pared the claws of the Lion of Judah, certified him 'meek and mild,' and recommended him as a fitting household pet for pale curates and pious old ladies....

For what it [that is, the Incarnation] means is this, among other things: that for whatever reason God chose to make man as he is—limited and suffering and subject to sorrows and death—he had the honesty and the courage to take his own medicine. Whatever game He is playing with His creation, He has kept His own rules and played fair. He can exact nothing from man that He has not exacted from Himself. He has Himself gone through the whole of human experience, from the trivial irritations of family life and the cramping restrictions of hard work and lack of money to the worst horrors of pain and humiliation, defeat, despair, and death. When He was a man, He played the man. He was born in poverty and died in disgrace and thought it well worthwhile....

And here Christianity has its enormous advantage over every other religion in the world. It is the only religion that gives value to evil and suffering.

What do we find God 'doing about' this business of sin and evil?...God did not abolish the fact of evil; He transformed it. He did not stop the Crucifixion; He rose from the dead...

Martin Luther:

There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: 'If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby! I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!' Yes, you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself.

C.S. Lewis:

"He came down from heaven" can almost be transposed into "Heaven drew earth up into it," and locality, limitation, sleep, sweat, footsore weariness, frustration, pain, doubt, and death are, from before all worlds, known by God from within. The pure light walks the earth; the darkness, received into the heart of Deity, is there swallowed up. Where, except in uncreated light, can the darkness be drowned?

Michael Card:

All we could ever imagine, could ever hope for, He is. He is the wise royal Counselor who fills us with wonder, the bringer of true understanding between all individuals and nations. He is the God of Might, whose power can accomplish any and every task His holiness demands. His power we need not fear for He is also the Father Eternal who is Tenderness Itself and who is ever motivated by His everlasting love for His children. Finally, He is Prince of Peace whose first Coming has already transformed society but whose second Coming will forever establish justice and righteousness. All this and infinitely more alive in an impoverished baby in a barn.

That is what Christmas means. Finding in a place where you would least expect to find anything you want, everything you could ever want.

Jeff Meyers:

You've probably saw the reports a few years back~mostly on the internet~that the famous atheist Anthony Flew at age 81 (or so) now believes in God. The headlines would have you believe that Flew had some sort of conversion and is now a believer. Remember Anthony Flew? For over 50 years he has been an icon of religious skepticism and a committed atheist. In 1950 he wrote a short essay called "Theology and Falsification." And ironically this paper was presented to Oxford's Socratic Club, led by C.S. Lewis (until 1954). Dorothy Sayers was part of this club, too. The paper has had an enormous impact. He began with a parable adopted from someone else: Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing both flowers and weeds. One explorer said, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagreed, "There is no gardener." So they decided to pitch their tents and set a watch. But no gardener is ever seen. The first explorer says, "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H.G. Wells's *The Invisible Man* could be both smelt and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the „believing%oo explorer is not convinced. "There is a gardener. But he is invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last his friend, the skeptical explorer despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?" The original claim that there is a gardener (an invisible deity that cares for the garden) has died the death of a thousand qualifications. The claim that there is a gardener (God) is not even meaningful. There are, of course, a number of problems~philosophical, theological, and biblical~with this



parable and what it supposedly proves. But this is not the time or place~Christmas Eve~to analyze something like this for every false assumption and error in logic. But I should note that Flew to date has not retracted his rejection of an invisible Gardner deity. When Flew says he "believes in God" that's not what he means. So, does Anthony Flew now believe in God? Yes and no. There are three problems with this statement "Anthony Flew believes in God." First, the verb "believes. Second, the noun "god." And third, just one small little detail~Flew denies that he has come to any kind of religious conviction about a supreme being. 1. What does it mean that Anthony Flew now „believes%oo? Anthony Flew now "believes in God" means "Anthony Flew now thinks there is a god" (small "g"). No, he doesn't *believe* in God. Rather, he now is of the opinion that there may be some sort of deity. That's not the same thing as believing in God. Trusting in God. But his „believing%oo clearly has no impact on his life or relationships. For us Christians "believing in God" is not merely some private philosophical opinion or a religious sentiment. Jesus birth was very public and his public life demanded change in the real world, not just in the hearts and minds of believers. You are either for Jesus or against him. He said „follow me,%oo not simply „form an opinion about divinity.%oo 2. Then there,s this little word "god." Whom do you refer to when you say "god'? The God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ or some generic supreme being. They are not the same. We often say that people who think that some supreme being exists "believe in God" but that's not accurate. They think that a god exists. To „believe in God%oo is to trust in the living and true God, the Creator and Redeemer revealed in Jesus Christ. Anthony Flew, however, says this: "I'm thinking of a god very different from the God of the Christian and far and away from the God of Islam, because both are depicted as omnipotent Oriental despots, cosmic Saddam Husseins. It could be a person in the sense of a being that has intelligence and a purpose, I suppose." Would Flew ever think that God was a cosmic oriental despot if he took the time to carefully consider the significance of the incarnation of God the Son? Modern man treats the substance of Christmas~the birth, the enfleshment of God himself~like they would a dead animal on the sidewalk~we walk carefully around it and try to avoid looking at or smelling it. Christmas becomes a metaphor, a symbol for something happy, something sweet, something~let,s

not define it too carefully or identify it too concretely~something nice to think about once a year. Very interestingly this is admitted by the champion of religious relativism and pluralism in our generation, John Hick, the English religious philosopher. In his book, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, Hick argues exactly this way. The title of his book says it all. He is happy to believe in the incarnation as a religious "idea," a metaphor of God's nearness to man. But he will have nothing to do with it as history, as an event in the real world, as something that actually happened. He wants nothing to do with the Christmas history as it is related in the Bible~God the Son begin born a human child to a virgin mother. We cannot believe that God actually became a man in Jesus Christ, Hick argues, because if we did that, we would have to accept that the Christian Faith is alone the truth about salvation and peace with God. We would have to accept Christianity's exclusive claim. We just can't do that, we can't believe that. So it turns out ^and everybody knows it~that there,s nothing but the shell left~colors, lights, the warmth of Christmas fires and cider, the smell of evergreen and cinnamon. But underneath nothing. Nothing at all.Ultimately, when Christmas sentiments have freed themselves from the story of Christmas, then every man and woman must imagine his idea of Christmas. These days Christmas provides an opportunity for one,s own privatized religious feelings.So year after year we have the same old tired „meaning%oo trotted out for us to „celebrate.%oo The "meaning of Christmas is giving" Yawn. The true meaning of the holiday season is enjoying family and friends and helping those who are less fortunate than we are. Sigh.No, these do not explain the true meaning of Christmas. Rather, they summarize how we are to respond to the miracle of Christmas eve. How we are to live in the light of the real meaning of Christmas~the incarnation of God the Son.But the focus of Christmas should not on us~some humanistic reduction of Christmas to religious sentiments or humanitarian concerns. These horizontal, social concerns are important, but they are not central, they arise because of the vertical.(Make the sign of the cross): God reveals himself to us in Jesus, comes to us first and then we love one another, give to one another.You forget the one and you will never truly have the other.I would hope that even our littlest children know that believing in God means trusting in the One who came to live among us and die for us.Christmas is the time

we remember not an invisible Gardener, not a parable, but the true story of God's becoming man for us. And the invisible God that is made know to us in the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is not a cosmic dictator or tyrant. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, a divine community of love and service turned outward toward his creatures. Believe in God, believe also in me, Jesus said.

Mark Horne:

### **From Virgin's Womb to Empty Tomb**

Congregation of the Lord, tonight I want to remind you of the soap opera that we all believe, by which we live, and by which we will be saved.

#### **1. Domesticity of the Gospel**

If I told you that someone had „domesticated Christmas,<sup>oo</sup> or that the church was guilty of „domesticating the gospel,<sup>oo</sup> or that the secular world always tries to domesticate the Bible, you would understand that I was describing something really negative. The Gospel is the power of God for salvation and to speak of domesticity doesn't refer to power but to being tamed. And we all know, at least when we are reminded, that God is not tame and so neither can be the stories about what he has done. C. S. Lewis was used by God to help us all in that way. Most of us have probably already thought of the words just now, as I have been talking, that he immortalized in his fantasy stories: „He is not a tame lion.<sup>oo</sup> This was Lewis, description of Jesus, and he was right.

But something doesn't quite fit. The Bible is the story of rescue from slavery, from an evil tyrant. In John's vision in revelation he sees the Devil as a great dragon. We have stories about evil tyrants bent on domination.

Darth Vader, Sauron, Lord Voldemort^someone who seems demonic or the very incarnation of death.

We have stories of great battles fought and wars and massive conflicts. You would expect the Bible to follow that pattern. It to involves a struggle with a great tyrant. Jesus came to defeat an

overlord. As we read in Hebrews 2:

14 Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, 15 and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery.

Sometimes the Bible meets these expectations. The story of the Exodus involves that sort of conflict and the stories in Joshua do too. There are other examples. David and Goliath is a classic.

But especially at the beginning, what we find are family melodramas. We find in Genesis over and over again that someone really wants to have a baby. In fact, it is not just Abraham and Sarah. If we read carefully we realize that Noah and his wife had to wait much longer than any of their contemporaries to have children, and that it took Isaac and Rebekah decades of waiting before they just had twins. And then the story of Jacob, his two wives and their quests for children read in some ways like an HBO melodrama about Mormon polygamists.

## **2. Long struggle to give birth**

The virgin birth is another chapter in the story of the long struggle to have a baby. While the war stories are there, the baby stories come first. Everything in Exodus starts with the struggle to have a baby boy survive Egypt, his attempt to kill him. David comes on the scene as someone reached by Samuel. And Samuel too begins with the story of a woman like Rachel, with an overly fertile rival wife to her husband and a great struggle to have a baby. Even Samson, his funny war on the Philistines starts with a woman who can't get pregnant unless God intervenes.

And Mary is just like that. We commonly think of the virgin birth as related to his deity. There may be some application to debates about Christ, his deity but the story in the Scriptures is concerned with showing that Jesus is the true new beginning, a new Adam. In Luke, Mary is compared to Elizabeth who, as an elderly barren woman with an elderly husband is obviously a new Sarah with a new Abraham.

The lesson of Mary,s pregnancy and birth to the savior is that salvation:

depends on faith, in order that the promise may rest on grace and be guaranteed to all his offspring~not only to the Jew but also to any Gentile as well who shares the faith of Abraham, who is the father of us all, as it is written, „I have made you the father of many nations%oo~in the presence of the God in whom he believed, who gives life to the dead and calls into existence the things that do not exist. 18 In hope he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations, as he had been told, „So shall your offspring be.%oo 19 He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead (since he was about a hundred years old), or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah,s womb. 20 No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, 21 fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised. 22 That is why his faith was „counted to him as righteousness.%oo 23 But the words „it was counted to him%oo were not written for his sake alone, 24 but for ours also. It will be counted to us who believe in him who raised from the dead Jesus our Lord, 25 who was delivered up for our trespasses and raised for our justification.

You see, the virgin birth shows that God can make life from the dead and call into existence things that are not. And the only response is trust in God,s promise. Mary,s belief that God would keep his promise showed that she was a true daughter of Abraham.

It may seem implausible, that the salvation of the world was brought about through people trusting God for their domestic problems~for something as basic as a baby Believing in God in the melodrama of family life was the precondition to any great war victory over the%oo deathlord.%oo

### **3. Long wait for resurrection**

The story of Christmas is a foreshadowing of the story of Easter. This is not just because we know that was Jesus, purpose, but also because the barren womb is firmly

established in the Bible as an image and sign of the problem of death. Our reading in Isaiah involves a prophecy of God,s people in exile longing to be saved. And their incapacity to escape is at once compared to the inability to conceive~they could give birth only to wind~and at the same time a corpse trapped in a tomb. But God gives babies because he can even give life to the dead.

That is why, by the way, Jesus, title as the risen and exalted one, is „firstborn of the dead.‰ Paul ascribes this to him in Colossians 1.18 and Jesus himself claims the title when he appears to the Apostle John in Revelation 1.5. In fact, we see this connection in the first sermon after the giving of the Spirit in Pentecost

So the message of Christmas is the message of the Gospel. God can bring about a new creation that we are impotent to bring about ourselves, and we should therefore trust Him to keep his promises. He has revealed to us that Christ has risen from the dead and that, even now, though we don,t see it, all things are being put under Jesus, feet.

We need to remember the manner in which salvation was brought to us on Christmas, because our tendency is only to remember the „shock and awe‰ of the angel,s singing to the shepherds or the star and the wise man. But many people didn,t hear the angels or see the star. Salvation started with a baby. God began intervening in the world by coming in a domestic setting.

And if we think that the struggles in our lives don,t measure up to the really important things we see in Scripture, then maybe we,re missing the point. Your soap operas, the domestic struggles of your lives~they matter to God. If you can trust him to raise you from the dead than you can trust him in these seemingly ordinary and small matters.

One of the birth stories we find in the Bible is the story of Samson,s birth at the end of Judges. That is an interesting place because Samson,s mother is not the only woman mentioned in Judges who is an instrument of salvation. Deborah is mentioned earlier as a mother to Israel and a judge. And she is



tied to Jael who delivers God's people by using household tools. Jael lives in tents and when an evil war leader asks her for shelter, she lures him to sleep and then hammers a tent peg through her head. Another woman destroys a pagan chief by breaking his head open with a millstone, a tool she would normally use for the process of making bread. And these household items are also used by men in Judges. Shamgar kills six hundred Philistines with an ox goad, not a sword or spear.

Here we have stories of God's people torn apart by professional armies led by Darth Vader characters, and they are not destroyed by sword or bow or horse or chariot. In many cases they are the only ones who have these things. They are destroyed by domestic life. By household objects and by babies.

Sometimes we can think that domestic life is a distraction and that God wants us to do something great. I'm not going to say that can never happen, but God chose to meet the legions of Satan with a baby from a struggling family. He wants you to trust him to be spreading the kingdom even through the mundane affairs of your family life.

**Postscript:** While delivering a speech from the above, I couldn't help but point out that our taste for drama is often very much like the Gospel story. The most popular action movies or TV series are the ones with a lot of family melodrama in them.

David Chilton, on "Let's Keep Christmas Commercialized":

Every year about this time, there rises a hue and cry about the "commercialization" of Christmas, accompanied by impassioned pleas to get back to the "real meaning" of the celebration. Too much time and money, we hear, are spent on the public side of the holiday — the hustle and bustle of shopping, the lavish decorations, and the often insincere displays of seasonal piety. Meanwhile, the true spirit of Christmas gets left behind. Some even argue that all public displays of Christmas are inappropriate. Every Christmas season seems to spawn a new series of lawsuits charging that the First Amendment is imperiled by the appearance of manger scenes on civic property, or by the

singing of carols by the local high school choir. I recall hearing a spokesman for the American Civil Liberties Union claim that the very message of Christmas itself was being violated by any public recognition of its existence. What we need, he said, is to remove Christmas from public life completely, and allow it to become once again a private, personal expression of religious sentiment and family values.

To him, apparently, the essence of Christmas was like something out of a Norman Rockwell painting — a household gathered around a piano drinking hot spiced cider and singing “Here we go a-wassailing,” while an apple-cheeked matron, her eyes sparkling with reflected light from the roaring fire in the hearth, loads the festal board with heaping platters of roast beef, steamed vegetables, and candied fruit.

Nothing wrong with that, of course, so far as it goes. It just doesn’t go far enough. While it would surely be a mistake to claim that commercialization is the essence of Christmas, such a statement is rather close to the truth. From the very beginning, Christmas was regarded as a public event. It was never regarded as a private matter, still less as the sentimental remembrance of childhood it has become. In its origins, Christmas was not only public, not only commercial — it was downright political.

One of the most well-known scenes of Christmas, commemorated in countless greeting cards and church pageants, is the coming of the Wise Men to honor the baby Jesus.<sup>[1]</sup> We should note at least in passing the public nature of the occasion. The Wise Men were public figures, and the arrival of their caravan into the capital city of Judea caused a considerable uproar. Far from treating their mission as an issue of private sentiment, they announced that the Child whom they came to worship was none other than the rightful ruler. (A popular rumor held that a coming world emperor would arise in Judea; one Caesar took so seriously he actually made plans to move his capital from Rome to Jerusalem.)

As for the issue of commercialization: it should be obvious that the Wise Men went Christmas shopping. Gold doesn’t grow on trees, and frankincense and myrrh require human labor to produce. Merchants have been capitalizing on the holiday since the very first Christmas.

But there’s more. For the story of the Wise Men’s visit doesn’t end with their presentation of gifts. St. Matthew’s account goes

on to tell of King Herod's jealous rage at this threat to his tyrannical rule (Herod had had several family members murdered, including his own sons, when he perceived them as rivals of his power). Herod realized the political implications of Jesus' birth, and ordered the massacre of all male babies in the vicinity of Bethlehem. As we all know, Herod missed the One he was after; and the story ends instead with the death of Herod and John the Baptizer's proclamation of Jesus as King. The early Christians were much concerned with the public aspects of the Incarnation. Indeed, they were martyred in droves because they refused to privatize their faith. Even their creeds, proclaiming Jesus Christ as the one and only link between heaven and earth, were far from being abstract theological treatises. That proclamation had a political impact that shattered forever the old pagan pretension that merely human rulers were "divine." Christians and non-Christians alike have benefitted immeasurably from the resulting restraint on governmental tyranny that is unique to Western civilization. I rejoice in the commercialization of Christmas. It signals the one time in the year when our world approaches sanity. The brightly lit houses, the evergreens garlanded with bulbs, the carols that provide the musical background for even our most hectic shopping — all creation comes alive with the message that the shift from B.C. to A.D. changed the world forever.

Some interesting notes on various aspects of the birth narrative (I might not agree with all of this, but it is insightful):

### **Lost in translation**

The misunderstanding is due to our English Bibles. The Greek word *katalyma* should never have been translated "inn", as it is in Luke 2:7. The 1395 edition of John Wycliffe's translation of Luke 2:7 reads: "And sche bare hir first borun sone, and wlapide hym in clothis, and leide hym in a cratche, *for ther was no place to hym in no chaumbir.*" For reasons known only to themselves, William Tyndale and the translators of the Geneva Bible and the Authorised Version opted for "inn" rather than "chamber". And so it has continued. The two exceptions to this translational custom are *The New English Bible* and David Stern's *The Jewish New Testament*. The NEB translates Luke 2:7 as: "She wrapped him in his swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because *there was no room for them to lodge in the*

house." The JNT renders Luke 2:7 as: "She wrapped him in cloth and laid him down in a feeding trough, because *there was no space for them in the living quarters.*"

In Luke 22:11 and Mark 14:14 (the only other places in the New Testament where the word appears) *katalyma* clearly does not mean an inn: "Then he shall show you a large, furnished upper room [*katalyma*] ..." (Luke 22:11.) If Luke had intended to refer to a commercial hostelry in chapter 2, he would have used *pandocheion*, the very word he uses in the parable of the Good Samaritan in 10:25-37: "... he set him on his own animal, brought him to an inn [*pandocheion*], and took care of him." The 1915 edition of *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* observes that "Luke with his usual care distinguishes between [*katalyma*] and *pandocheion*, and his use of the verb *katalúō* (Luk 9:12; Luk19:7) makes his meaning clear... It is the word used of the 'upper room' where the Last Supper was held (Mar 14:14; Luk 22:11, 'guest-chamber'), and of the place of reception in Bethlehem where Joseph and Mary failed to find quarters (Luk 2:7). It thus corresponds to the spare or upper room in a private house or in a village..." (available online at [www.bible-history.com/isbe/I/INN](http://www.bible-history.com/isbe/I/INN))

### **...in a lowly cattle shed?**

In Luke's birth narrative, the Messiah was laid in a manger from which animals ate. Does that not strongly suggest a birth in a stable? According to the Biblical and Middle Eastern scholar Kenneth Bailey, from the time of King David until the mid-twentieth century, most village homes in Israel and the Middle East consisted of two rooms; one for the family and the other for guests. The family room had an area, usually about four feet lower than the living space, in which the family donkey, cow and two or three sheep spent the night. The animals were brought into the house last thing at night and taken outside first thing in the morning. In the house they ate from mangers dug out of the stone floor of the raised family living area.

The *katalyma* was the room reserved for guests and visitors. Contrary to the traditional Christmas story, Mary was not in labour when she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. Luke 2:6 records, "So it was, that *while they were there* [not upon arrival], the days were completed for her to be delivered." The ESV reads, "And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth." How could we have ever concluded from the

biblical text that Mary was in labour at the time she and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem? The idea may have originated with a second-century apocryphal work of fiction, *The Protevangelium of James*: "And they came to the midst of the way, and Mary said unto him: Take me down from the ass, for that which is within me presseth me, to come forth. And he took her down from the ass and said unto her: Whither shall I take thee to hide thy shame? for the place is desert." (*Protevangelium of James* 17:8, available online at

[www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancyjames.html](http://www.earlychristianwritings.com/infancyjames.html))

### **No crib for a bed**

Matthew records that when the magi arrived in Bethlehem they entered "the house", not "the stable", and there they "fell down and worshipped Him" (Mt 2:11). Jews and Arabs have traditionally placed a high value on family and hospitality, so when Caesar Augustus decreed that the Jewish population of ancient Israel had to return to their home towns to register for the census, Joseph went to Bethlehem "because he belonged to the house and line of David" (Luke 2:4).

"To turn away a descendant of David in 'the City of David' would be an unspeakable shame on the entire village," writes Kenneth Bailey in *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (p. 26).

Even if there had been no room to stay with Joseph's relatives in Bethlehem, no village in the hill country of Judea was more than an hour's ride on donkey from Bethlehem, so Joseph could easily have taken his betrothed to her relatives, Elizabeth and Zechariah.

From these considerations, we can construct a more accurate scenario of the events surrounding the birth of Messiah. Joseph and his pregnant fiancée Mary made their way this ancestral village of Bethlehem for the census decreed by Caesar. There, he and Mary stayed with Joseph's relatives for the remainder of her pregnancy in a home which was crowded due to the census being taken and where there was no longer any space in "the guest room". Consequently, Mary gave birth to her child in the family room and the baby was placed on clean straw in one of the stone mangers. The birth of the Lord of glory was indeed humble but the manger in which he was laid was in a warm, friendly family home, not in a cold, dirty and lonely stable.

This is not a call to preachers to devote their Christmas sermons to denouncing the traditional misunderstandings of the birth of Messiah. Still less is it an encouragement to ministers to ignore

the festive season and to steer clear of preaching on the nativity. It is a plea for more careful reading, exegesis and exposition of Scripture in order to draw out better and more appropriate applications from the text of the Bible.

(<http://www.cwi.org.uk/library/articles/HAOM.html>)

C. S. Lewis:

The Son of God became man to enable men to become sons of God.

Bernard of Clairvaux:

You have come to us as a small child, but you have brought us the greatest of all gifts, the gift of eternal love. Caress us with your tiny hands, embrace us with your tiny arms, and pierce our hearts with your soft, sweet cries.

Charles Spurgeon:

Infinite, and an infant. Eternal, and yet born of a woman. Almighty, and yet hanging on a woman's breast. Supporting a universe, and yet needing to be carried in a mother's arms. King of angels, and yet the reputed son of Joseph. Heir of all things, and yet the carpenter's despised son. Oh, the wonder of Christmas.