

December 18, 2022 Why Bethlehem? Luke 2:1-7, 15-20

On the surface of things it would appear that Caesar Augustus made the decision that Jesus should be born in Bethlehem. After all, he was the one who ordered the census to be taken throughout the Roman Empire. It was a decision about money. He wanted to know where every man, woman and child could be found. And like the Federal Government in Ottawa, and the Provincial Government in Toronto, and the local Government in Stirling-Rawdon, he wanted everyone to pay the appropriate amount of taxes. In part that was about paying for the army of occupation that had come from Rome.

We know better simply because we are a people who approach this time of year with a whole different slant on things. We believe in God, one in three, three in one. We believe the teaching of the sacred texts, Old Testament, New Testament. We believe in the God who saves people from their sinfulness, who loves and guides and leads us in the matter of our destiny. The prophets had written that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. And therefore one must understand that the power of God included the possibility of using Caesar's decision on taxation to cause the chosen people to be in the chosen place at the chosen moment of time.

And Luke ties it down in time to the best of his ability in a world that had nothing that would resemble our modern system of dating things. In the time when Augustus was Caesar. In the time when he ordered the census. In the

time when Quirinius was the governor of Syria. And so we come to other details, the details of the first Census. People were required to register. And they had to register in their home towns. Joseph had been born in Bethlehem and was of the lineage of David the King. So he makes that journey back to Bethlehem, and he takes Mary, his wife who is carrying the holy child with him. Destiny unfolds in accordance with the prophecies. Jesus is born in Bethlehem. The family is registered for the Imperial tax system. And as a result...things unfold as they should...and we who tend to worry about such things, can be confident in the details of time and place. No one denies where Jesus was born. And for 20 centuries Christian pilgrims who could afford to make the trip have visited the city of David, and knelt at the holy place...a cave in a corner of an ancient church basement. Because we have always built church buildings on ground we were convinced God made holy.

You have heard me say it before, I say it again. Luke set a new standard for the writing of history when he did his research, when he talked to people who were there, when he did his best in that time to, tie the details down in time and space. Joseph and Mary made the journey to Bethlehem, which is to say they obeyed the Roman law concerning the census. They followed the rules. I's were dotted and T's were crossed. And all those Christmas Cards that portray Mary as riding on the donkey and Joseph leading the way proclaim another detail that women understand better than men. She was not just pregnant, she was getting close to her due date. She had walked at Joseph's side as far as she could. When she could

walk no further, Joseph bore the burdens that had been on the donkey, and Mary rode the rest of the way.

Bethlehem was full of travelers doing the same thing Joseph was doing: participating in the system, doing what was required by the powers in place at the time. He finds her shelter in the stable because there was no where else to go. And besides, she was going into labour. And there the baby Jesus was born.

But the story is not really that simple. It does not end with Joseph registering himself and his family. It does not end with the population growing by one more tiny little baby. From the very beginning anonymity is torn from their grasp, by destiny, and by shepherds. By definition the shepherds are security guards. They tend sheep. They do not necessarily own them. Flocks and herds are the basis of wealth and well being at the time. Shepherds are at the bottom of the societal pyramid. They watch. They protect the flock, and they do not go on excursions that would expose the sheep to danger in normal circumstances.

However, these shepherds did. They talked it over and they made a decision. They understand that in seeing angels and listening to them, the message of salvation, the chorus that filled the sky and sang... Signs and wonders have occurred in their neighbourhood and on their watch. And they really want to see this “thing that has happened.” I cannot tell you if some of them stayed to watch the sheep, or whether

they just left them to go see, or whether they went in shifts. It says “they hurried off.”

No less a figure than the great Reformer John Calvin wrote this concerning that very phrase in Scripture: “immediately after receiving this intelligence, they must go to Bethlehem to see it. In the same manner, every one of us, according to the measure of his faith and understanding, ought to be prepared to follow wheresoever God calls.” So Calvin was convinced they felt God was so involved in this...they must simply go and be witnesses of the facts.

But witnesses to what facts? They find Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger. Can this really be the King of Kings? The Saviour of the world? Born in a barn and attended by emotional shepherds who smell of their stock? Yes. And yes. And Yes!! And what is more what Luke has learned from Mary is that the first thing the shepherds did was they told them...Joseph and Mary...what the angel had said about this child. And they apparently told whoever else was there, the midwives, a crowd that has gathered...they are all amazed at what the shepherds said. They cannot contain what has been revealed to them. They affirm that Mary and Joseph are not mad or misled...they too have listened to the revelation of angels!

There are two things that have to be noted as this episode ends. First of all, Mary did two things. She remembered all the details, and she “pondered these things in her heart.”

She has had an effect on the whole of Christianity. That Luke mentions the details she remembered underscores the fact that she is clearly a source for what Matthew and Luke both write about the birth of Jesus. And that she thought deeply about them reflects something else about her own role as a witness and a disciple, that is a follower of Jesus. She is there when Jesus turns the water into wine at the wedding in Cana. She follows her first born throughout the Galilee ministry. She follows HIM to Jerusalem. She witnesses his death, and burial. And she is one of the women who learn that HE is risen on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day. She seems to have continually been labouring to understand the biggest part of the picture, and connecting the dots. She was a remarkable lady.

And then the shepherds. This singular night. This very special baby. This holy family, for such we call them. It changes their lives. Somehow they have gone from being coarse outcasts, to witnesses eager to share their testimonies. And their return to their work witnessed by others I presume, is simply marvelous. "They went back singing praises to God for all that they had heard and seen: it had been just as the angel had told them." They are certainly no longer afraid. They trust their eyes and their ears. They have seen angels and lived to tell the story. And what the angel told them to go and see....word for word. We find ourselves saying about Christmas what we say about Easter. He was born. It is true! He is risen! Hallelujah!

Let us pray;

Lord, like the shepherds, we have seen the light in the midst of the darkness of our world. We have been touched by grace and love in the midst of our fallen estate. YOU have changed our lives, not for a season, but for all time and eternity. Bless us with the ability to follow you wheresoever YOU would lead us. Unfold our destinies, that we might be found giving you the honour, the glory and the praise for what we have seen and heard and shared in experience. In Jesus name we pray. Amen