

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and 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 heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Christmas Eve Meditation 2005 "Beautiful the Story"

A familiar Christmas hymn has us sing, "Gentle Mary laid her child, lowly in a manger; he is still the undefiled, but no more a stranger. Son of God, of humble birth, beautiful the story! Praise his name on all the earth, hail the King of glory."

The "King of glory" lies lowly in a manger. The "Son of God" is of humble birth. Is this story "beautiful"? In what way? I wonder if we've desensitized ourselves from the scandal of God's incarnation because we are scared about what this scandal means in relation to our lives. That we stand in need, always, of grace.

A decree went out and all the world, well the Roman world, was to be registered. Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem as per the Emperor's orders. God Incarnate was not born in Mary and Joseph's hometown of Nazareth in one of their family's homes! God was born in Bethlehem, the place Mary and Joseph were ordered to go. God was born to a young unwed mother and her fiancée. God was born to parents who were refused hospitality when Mary was about to give birth. The story on this level doesn't sound so "beautiful". Our God, the Ancient of Days, was born in the dwelling of barn animals.

Jesus was a weak and vulnerable baby of parents who were just as clueless as most new parents are about raising their baby.

Luke's account of Jesus' birth points us toward the particular in the story. We are not supposed to gloss over the circumstances of Jesus' birth. The details are there for us to ponder in our hearts and minds just as Mary did. For it is God, who was born in lowly and vulnerable conditions, whom Luke proclaims has come to save us.

The good news of God who came to be with us is mixed, for all times, with what society considers lowly, scandalous, and perplexing. Luke intended the story to read this way because he believed only heaven could explain to the average person the beauty of God's incarnation. We worship power and might. Who can accept the glory of God mixing with lowliness?

So as shepherds in the fields were tending their sheep, in the midst of an ordinary night's work, the Messiah's birth is announced from the heavens by an angel. "I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord." (Lk. 2:10-11) A multitude of angels filled the sky giving glory to God in the highest. They reveal that Jesus who looks utterly unpromising as an earthly king, the promised Messiah, has come as God's grace and glory.

We need to hear Luke's story of God who came and dwelt among us. It's the story of God incarnate, God with us, who faced all that we have to face in this world. St. John Chrysostom wrote in the Fourth Century that in Jesus, God "decreed that shame shall become honor, infamy be clothed with glory, and abject humiliation the measure of his goodness. For this he assumed my body...taking my flesh, he gives me his spirit...that he may save me.... Because God is now on earth, and man in heaven; on every side all things commingle...(that God) might dwell amongst us."¹ In Jesus, God shares our humanity and knows our desire, suffering, joy, and sorrow.

Through the eyes of faith the glory of God revealed in human weakness becomes for us a "beautiful" story as God transforms our humanity by living as one of us.

God came in Jesus to show the depths God will go to give us grace. This knowledge makes "beautiful the story!" We cannot do a thing to save ourselves; we are receivers of grace. Some days we stand with our hearts open to receive God's grace and love. Other days we deny God with us. Yet we daily receive God's grace nonetheless! It is good news that we are indebted to the grace of God revealed in the Christ child whose birth was unpromising by the world's standards. The Incarnation leads us to believe that God will continue to give grace to each one of us as we stand in need of continual reconciliation.

Luke proclaimed that God's glory was revealed for the particular individual as well as for the world! To you is born this day a Savior! Receivers of grace, let us welcome God into all the nooks and crannies of our lives. There is no place to be ashamed of, no place God

is afraid to enter, and walk alongside of, and transform. Luke told us the good old story. God's glory is revealed in unexpected places! What may look lowly at first glance could end up being just the place, situation, time or life in which God's glory is revealed most clearly.

The Word became flesh and dwelt among us; therefore every human life can be redeemed through God's gracious love! This is the good news of great joy for all the people.
Amen.

¹ St. John Chrysostom, "The Mystery" in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Orbis Books: Maryknoll, NY, 2001) 232-3.