



“Expectations – Beginning”

Luke 2:1–7, 21-35

Every journey has a beginning and an ending

We begin an exciting new seven-week series this week--*Expectations*. We plan to tell the story of Jesus’ journey from his birth to the cross.

We begin at the beginning, with Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem, which lies a few miles south of Jerusalem and is now in the

West Bank, under the control of the Palestinian Authority. The busyness of Nativity Square is calm compared to the shoving and pushing inside the Church of the Nativity, as crowds queue up to view a small, over-done shrine that marks the spot remembered as the place of Jesus’ birth. Yet, even with the noise and the crowds, one still knows that below the marble and stone of the Basilica is the ground upon which Jesus was born.

No Room at the Inn

When I was young, I pictured Joseph and Mary getting turned away from hotel after hotel until finally they collapsed of fatigue in someone’s barn. But this is not the case.

Bethlehem was a tiny place at the time of Jesus’ birth, probably too small to have any sort of public inn. Nor did the young couple necessarily have to find a cave to stay in. It is also possible that they were taken in by one of the peasant families in Bethlehem, for all Jews were expected to take in travelers.

Most peasant homes consisted of a single large room, often with the sleeping quarters on a raised platform so that animals (the most important possessions) could be brought into house. Mary and Joseph would have had to make do with the animals’ area, hence the presence of the manger (a feeding trough). Note, Luke never mentions the presence of animals though that may be simply because they were commonplace.

The birth

The young couple, a tradesman and his pregnant fiancé, made their way southward from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem, a small village five miles from Jerusalem. There would be no welcoming delegation, no trumpets, no parades. Instead they would try to get comfortable in a room where animals were sometimes kept. There, Mary, probably only fourteen or so, would give birth. Nothing was out of the ordinary. Mary would have done what all ancient Palestinian mothers did. She would have cut the umbilical cord, tied it off, and tightly wrapped the newborn in strips of cloth to keep him warm and to help him grow straight. But later, Mary would be visited by some shepherds bearing a most fantastical tale, one which would confirm what Mary had been told when she was visited by the angel, Gabriel.

In those days, shepherds were only a step above slaves on the social ladder. Yet, they told Mary and her husband that angels had sent them to find a newborn in a feeding trough. But the angels had also told the shepherds something much more remarkable. The astonished shepherds told Mary that the angels had been the LORD God’s messengers, bearing the Good News, that at long last Israel’s Savior and Messiah, the Lord, had been born – and this Lord was Mary’s baby. And as with all Jewish male babies, Mary and Joseph would soon take their newborn to the temple to be circumcised (See the textbox on post-birth rituals).

Salvation

Simeon was old. He was righteous, devout, and pretty much waiting to die. But he wanted to live long enough to see the salvation of Israel. Simeon knew that things were not right. He needed only to look up at the Roman soldiers standing atop the Antonia Fortress to be reminded, for the fortress sat adjacent to the Lord’s temple in Jerusalem. Israel had suffered for so long. But now, the Holy Spirit had assured Simeon that he would live to see the realization of his hope.

One day, on what must have felt a bit like an impulse, Simeon went to the temple. There, he saw a young woman, a girl really, with her husband. They were carrying a newborn into the temple to be consecrated. As soon as

Simeon laid eyes on the child, he knew that he could die in peace, and exclaimed, “For my eyes have seen your salvation.”

Simeon was not speaking of his personal salvation. Salvation for the Jews had nothing to do with “getting to heaven” or any other path to personal redemption. Instead, the salvation for which Simeon had been waiting was the salvation of Israel and, hence, the world. The child, this Messiah-child, would be the fulfillment of God’s promise that Israel would be redeemed from sin and restored to a right relationship with God. In other words, God had made a covenant with Israel and that covenant would be kept by the baby in Mary’s arms. And as had been promised to Abraham two millennia before (Genesis 12), all the world would be blessed through Israel. The baby was to be a light to the Gentiles every bit as much as to the Jews.

Despite the events surrounding Jesus’ birth, Mary and Joseph were astounded by the appearance of this old man and what he had to say. But Simeon went on. The baby would create turmoil not peace. Many would speak against him. Jesus would reveal what is really in people’s hearts which is, of course, often not very pretty. And, in a statement that surely cut to Mary’s heart, Simeon saw suffering ahead, saying to the new mother, “A sword will pierce your own soul as well.” It might be all angels and adoration now, but the coming of God’s kingdom would exact a high price. For a shadow had fallen across the manger, the shadow of a cross. Even in the joy of birth, Simeon saw the truth of what lay ahead for Jesus.

Pax Romana or Pax Christi?

Preachers will often use Luke’s story of Jesus’ birth to contrast the humbleness of his birth, this King of Kings, with the priorities and assumptions of our world. For example, everyone in Luke’s story is poor and powerless. There are no wise men or expensive gifts, only peasants and shepherds. The important and influential of ancient Palestine are absent. All this is in keeping with Luke’s larger portrait of Jesus, for Luke has more to say about the dangers of wealth than do any of the other Gospel writers. Yet, I wonder if we really get it, if we really grasp the gauntlet that is thrown down at the feet of the powerful by the birth of Jesus.¹

Jesus was born in about 6BC.² For more than two decades, Augustus, the adopted son of Julius Caesar, had ruled the empire he created. In the eastern end of the empire, he was even beginning to be worshipped as a god. Under Augustus, the

Post-birth rituals

Jewish Law prescribed certain rituals after childbirth. First, all male infants were circumcised on the eighth day after birth (verse 21).

Second, as a reminder of the Exodus (when the first born of Egypt died and the Israelites were redeemed out of their slavery), the first child born to a couple was consecrated to the Lord’s service. Then, the infant would be redeemed (bought back) at a price of five shekels. Luke notes Jesus’ consecration (verse 22 and 23) but makes no mention of Jesus’ redemption ritual. Perhaps Luke did not know all the specifics of Jewish Law and custom. Or perhaps Luke wants to make the point that Jesus remained consecrated to the Lord, that his parents never redeemed him from the Lord’s service.

Purification of the mother was a third ritual. After the birth of a male child, the mother was ceremonially unclean for seven days and then went through a 33-day purification period. This period was twice as long for mothers of female infants. (Don’t ask me why!) While she was ritually unclean the mother could not enter the temple nor touch any holy object. After the 40 (or 80) days the mother was to offer to the Lord a lamb and either a pigeon or a turtledove. If the mother could not afford a lamb, she could instead offer two turtledoves or pigeons. Mary can offer only the two birds (verse 24).

Simeon and Anna encounter the infant Jesus when Mary brings him to the temple for his consecration (verse 27).

¹ The phrase throwing down a gauntlet refers to the medieval practice of one knight tossing his glove at the feet of another to signal a challenge to combat.

² The makers of the calendar we use miscalculated the year of Jesus’ birth. We know now that Herod the Great died in 4BC. Since he ordered the killing of all Bethlehem children younger than two in an attempt to kill Jesus, then Jesus must have been born prior to 4BC.

empire enjoyed the *Pax Romana* (Roman Peace). To end one hundred years of civil war, Romans had grabbed onto the peace offered by Augustus. But the peace was enforced by the brutal dictatorship of Augustus, his representatives, and his legions. So far as the Romans were concerned, there could be only one Lord, and that was Augustus.

But God’s herald angels brought news of a very different peace: Glory to God! Peace on earth! This would not be a peace brought with the edge of a sword but with the birth of a child. The infant lying in Simeon’s arms is Savior, Messiah, and Lord. The peace the angels proclaim, the *Pax Christi* (Peace of Christ), is more than a feeling of rest. It is more than goodwill with our neighbors. This peace is the long-awaited salvation that has now come to earth. This peace, this *shalom*³, is the wholeness and well-being of restored persons and a renewed creation. The *Pax Christi* could not coexist with the *Pax Romana* then, and it cannot now. The world cannot be divided up into that which is God’s and that which is Caesar’s. Jesus’ challenge to the earthly powers is as direct now as it was then. There is and can be only one Lord.

Daily Bible Readings *More on Jesus’ birth*

Monday	Luke 1:1-38	The births of John the Baptizer and Jesus are foretold.
Tuesday	Luke 1:39-80	Mary visits Elizabeth and John is born.
Wednesday	Luke 2:1-20	Luke’s full account of Jesus’ birth
Thursday	Luke 2:21-40	Post-birth and the return to Nazareth
Friday	Matthew 1	Jesus’ genealogy and birth
Saturday	Matthew 2	Wise men, flight to Egypt, massacre of the innocents, and the return from Egypt

³ The Hebrew word for “peace”