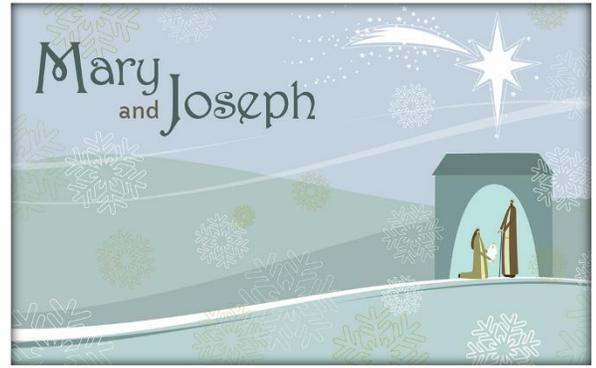


“Mary and Joseph”

John 1:18; Luke 2:1–15

The Christ-child is born into a dark world for the sake of all the world



During our Advent journey we’ve seen a few signposts pointing us toward the Good News that is Christmas. John spoke of the Word that was with God in the beginning and was God.

Zechariah, standing amidst the swirling scent of burning incense, was visited by an angel of the Lord who brought the astounding news that his wife would bear a son who would “make ready a people prepared for the Lord” (Luke 1:17). Mary too was visited by the angel Gabriel. She, a virgin, would give birth to a son. But unlike her cousin, Elizabeth, Mary’s son will be the “Son of the Most High,” the “Son of God.” These are most extraordinary events. Yet, when we get to Jesus’ actual birth, everything seems quite ordinary, or worse, for Mary and Joseph.

The two of them have made their way to Bethlehem for the census-taking, finding it a very crowded place. They’ve found a home in which to stay, though it seems that they have to sleep where the animals usually do.¹ In all likelihood, they are sent to a nearby cave for shelter, a cave where some herd animals are kept and other creatures probably wander in. There, Mary has her baby and then places her newborn in a feed-trough. There are no angels, no wise men, no gifts. Just an ordinary, painful, and messy birth.

From his simple story of Jesus’ birth, Luke shifts the scene to a nearby hillside. There, shepherds are gathered for the night, guarding their herds. It is to them, not to any of Judea’s prominent and powerful citizens, nor even to Mary and Joseph, that an angel of God comes, proclaiming “good news of great joy.” Jesus has been born. The angel gives the shepherds a sign – but certainly not the sort of sign we would expect to accompany such a momentous proclamation. There is nothing miraculous about the sign, it is simply “a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” The shepherds hurry to find the baby and when they do, they run with breathless excitement to tell Mary and Joseph about the angels.

Fred Craddock writes, “These two, busy with the chores of childbirth under the most difficult of conditions, do not themselves experience heaven’s visit but hear of it from the shepherds. How unusual! But theirs is the baby, and that is enough.”²

Savior . . . Messiah . . . Lord

It is reasonable to suppose that even lowly shepherds in ancient Jewish Palestine would have grasped the consequences of the angels’ proclamation that this infant, born in King David’s city, was “a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (v. 11). It is all there, packed into those few, brief words.

Though it boggles the mind, Mary’s tiny squealing infant was the Deliverer and Redeemer, the anointed of God, Ruler and Master of all creation. Augustus, who had pronounced his own father divine (making himself the “son of god”), was no more than a bit player in the new world created by the birth of Mary’s baby. God had burst onto the world scene in a new way, turning it upside down. He had raised up the lowly and the humble. It was to the meek and in the lowest of places that the true Son of God, the Son of the Most High, Prince of Peace, had been born. Unlike Augustus, this child was not the bringer of mighty military victories but the bringer of God’s peace, and not just for a few, but for all (v.10).

For his part, Augustus never even heard about this baby. But within a hundred years, his successors would be trying to wipe out the baby’s followers. And in little more than 300 years, the Roman Emperor himself would

¹ Though we translate the Greek word in v. 7, *kataluma*, as “inn,” this was not some sort of hotel; there was another word for that.

² from Fred Craddock’s commentary on Luke in the *Interpretation* series, Abingdon Press, 1990

become a Christian. The empire of the Caesars is long gone, but the kingdom of this baby is without end. Rejoice! Immanuel!

Is Christmas Day the end of the holidays or the beginning?

With all that said, here's the problem: Christians have never been able to do a very good job at Christianizing Christmas. In the early centuries of Christianity, Christians didn't try to keep Christmas at all. Even when Christians began to try to "take over" the winter festivals they had limited success. Many of our most cherished Christmas traditions never had anything to do with the birth of Jesus Christ. Yule logs, evergreen, feasts, gift-giving and more were all part of these festivals and as Christians created Christmas, they did their best to incorporate them all.

This isn't all bad. Celebrations, families, giving gifts – these are all good things in themselves, but they create an uncomfortable tension with the sacred at Christmas. Lawrence Wood notes that, at times, Christians have nearly managed to kill Christmas in their attempts to Christianize the holiday. The English Puritans pretty well outlawed the holiday, insisting that stores stay open on December 25 and that parliament meet. Keeping Christmas was illegal in the Plymouth Colony. Gratefully, Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* was in part responsible for the restoration of Christmas in the midnineteenth century.³

So, Christians' uneasiness with Christmas is nothing new, and the tension is taken to ever new heights with the unending expansion of the commercial holiday. So much so that it increasingly seems like Christmas ends with Christmas Day, rather than beginning with it.

Yet, Christmas marks the transition from preparing for Christ's arrival to celebrating it. We gather on Christmas Eve to celebrate that singular moment when God became flesh. We worship the God who is revealed to us in that tiny, slimy, squirming baby. It doesn't take any special wisdom to see that God is great...but a baby born to a peasant family in an out of the way corner of this planet? That, we could never figure out on our own.

In his book, *Christmas: A Candid History*, Bruce Forbes has a simple proposal for putting Christ back in Christmas: keep the twelve days of the Christmas season. On the traditional church calendar, the Season of Christmas begins with Advent and ends on January 6, the day we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. In the traditions of the western church, this day marked the arrival of the three wise men bearing gifts who, by doing so, reveal that the baby is Lord and King. What are known as the "twelve days" are those between Dec 25 and Jan 6.

Simple . . . all the trees and lights can go up as early as we like. Santa and the gifts can stay. But beginning on December 25 and for twelve days thereafter, we begin to focus on the birth of Jesus in a way that we can't in the hustle and bustle before the 25th.

You and I aren't going to stop the commercialization of Christmas or even slow it down. But we can begin to build personal and family traditions that incorporate our worship and celebration of the Christ-child into the twelve days of Christmas. Perhaps we can begin to put the Christ back in Christmas – after the 25th, if not before. Even this year!

³ rom Wood's review in *Christian Century* of Bruce Forbes' book, *Christmas, A Candid History*