



“How Do You Get to Bethlehem”

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Scripture (NRSV):

Luke 2:1-16

2 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ 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. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ 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.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ 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: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ 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.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

Sermon:

The gospel writer Luke tells us:

Joseph was commanded to go to Bethlehem. Imperial might pushed pregnant Mary to travel, far beyond the time it would be safe for a pregnant woman to do so.

Shepherds were urged by an army of angels. Overwhelming, overpowering, sent from God on high...but not with violence, just glory, glory, glory and awe!

The gospel writer Matthew tells us:

Wise sages, astrologers, found a new star in the night sky and discerned it was heavy with meaning. They were led by it to foreign lands, following it wherever it might take them.

Matthew also tells us:

That wicked Herod was threatened by the words of ancient prophecy and he sent his soldiers with swords in their hands, into Bethlehem, to kill the little children, staining the streets and staining their souls, with the blood of babies.

Bethlehem, town of bread. Sitting quietly outside the ancient city of Jerusalem.

A small place.

An insignificant town.

Yet, they came. In diverse ways, they found their way to Bethlehem.

Driven by imperial might. Urged by angels. Following a portent in the sky. Sent to spill innocent blood.

What of you? What of I?

Shall we go? Will you seek out God in the silence of night? In the insignificant town or place? Will you look for signs, will you listen for awe-inspiring messages of peace and God's presence?

Will you seek out Bethlehem?

Will I?

What is the point of Christmas? Finding a baby? Or finding God?

In unexpected places. A small town. Among smelly, disreputable shepherds. With foreigners coming into town. And deadly danger creeping close to infant innocence.

Charles Dickens, the genius who gave us Ebenezer Scrooge and the Ghosts of Christmas Past, Present and Future... found his way to Bethlehem through children. He told his friends, he would never trust a man who did not care about a child. For the maker of the stars was once a little child.

Some find their way to Bethlehem like the magi; through study, and deep thought. Humbled by all they do not know, they seek out the source of all true Wisdom, all Understanding, all Power wielded in Mighty Love.

Some of us are simple, and maybe even smelly or a bit disreputable...like the shepherds. But we can be like them also in this, overwhelmed by the glory and the majesty, the goodness and the joy of many heavenly messengers; bringing good news to all people, news of God's love and favor. Going to Bethlehem in awe.

We may be like Joseph and Mary; not worldly wise but loving and brave anyhow, and going where they have to go, together. With a courage and a trust that it will be all right, somehow, it will be all right. Hanging on to each other, and trusting in God, and each other.

Maybe the soldiers who came with murder in their hands, had their hearts changed. Repentance and remorse, grief; maybe they went back to the scene of the crime, and were changed. Maybe they went to Bethlehem seeking forgiveness, atonement for their dreadful sin of murder.

It is Christmas Eve.

The story is being told again, can you put yourself within it?

No matter how you travel to Bethlehem, I urge you to go there. Go to God. Find God's deep love and endless care for us.

See the compassion. See the tenderness of love. Shown in a vulnerable infant, new parents, wonder-filled people. See the tenderness of God in our human life of struggle and pain and joy and repentance, remorse and hope. All this, known and shared through the love of God.

God, choosing us. God, calling us to come closer.

God, calling us to come and meet God. In our diverse ways of being human...still the message is...

God wants to meet us. God invites us close. God urges us, sends us messengers come, God says, seek me, and you will find me.

May we find God, in love, in mercy...whether we are in Bethlehem the town or in the unique places of our lives; dark or light, lonely and lost, or fulfilled and hopeful.

May we find God in love, in mercy...whether we stand with our beloved life partner, or in a crowd of disreputable folk, awed by angels, or seeking God through the wisdom of the stars. Maybe, just maybe, we will find God's shining through the eyes of a baby.

God is not far, God is not distant, God is not unknowable.

The promise of Bethlehem is that God is near, very near. And sees us, the creatures of God's hands, as precious and loveable.

So precious, that even a baby in a small town in the Middle East, can be the message of God's loving presence for us, God with us.

Alleluia! Christ is born!