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Bears and Boars, Bethlehem and A Baby: Reflections on a Very Messy Christmas

We've heard the story so often and we've seen the beautiful depictions by artists through the ages, those nativity scenes that show a stylized but always peaceful and pristine Holy Family with a quiet sleeping baby and a radiantly joyful Mary and Joseph. We read that simple sentence in Luke's Christmas story – "He went [to Bethlehem] to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child" – and we don't realize what an awful journey it would have been. It's about 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It's about the same distance as from where we sit to the east side of Salida. Not a difficult drive and a scenic one at that, and somewhat similar to the terrain that Mary and Joseph would have walked. But Joseph and the very pregnant Mary didn't drive, they didn't even ride a donkey. They walked. 90 miles they walked. Along the flatlands beside the Jordan River and up and down the forested hills. Assuming their trek was in the winter (although we don't really know the actual birth month and day), it would have been in the low 30s at night and the 60s in the daytime and it would have likely rained a lot – those cold, piercing winter rains that can feel colder than a zero-degree snowy day.

They likely didn't have a tent either, and would have had to carry almost all their food and water underneath their garments – an inner robe plus a heavy outer woolen robe or cloak designed to repel at least some of the rain but this was no Gore-Tex-engineered winter clothing either. The journey probably took about 10 days and while

they may have found crude lodgings along the way, most nights found them on the ground under the meager protection of a tree or bush with high hopes that there would be no bandits or wild boars or bears who had forgotten to hibernate to assail them. It was a grueling journey and when they arrived in Bethlehem, dirty, damp, and exhausted, many scholars think that the “stable” where they sought shelter was actually likely one of the many caves in the area. And as one scholar puts it, “Even though... the cave may have provided some protection from the elements, the ‘noisy and dirty’ conditions under which Jesus was born would have made the event anything but ‘warm and wonderful and sweet and comfortable....’”¹

In the first decades of the first century, Christianity did not spread as fast as it might have because to those Greco-Roman folks outside of Palestine, the idea that God would have come to earth as a baby to a no-name couple who didn’t have the money to find more seemly transportation and who were so poor they couldn’t even book the Bethlehem Motel 6 seemed ludicrous. The Apostle Paul talks about “the scandal of the cross” – that God’s own Son would die such an undignified death – but it is also accurate to say there was also the “scandal” of God down in the dirt in the muck and messiness of life, the “scandal” of a God choosing to be made manifest in the pain and sweat of childbirth.

For you see the mythological “gods” of the Greeks and Romans were aloof. They had little to do with human beings unless it was to occasionally come to earth to torment some poor soul. And their birth stories are downright bizarre and anything but

¹http://articles.latimes.com/1995-12-23/local/me-17102_1_gospel-accounts I am indebted to this article for the facts about the journey cited, even as I am aware that many scholars maintain that both the journey and the purported census that was the reason for it are Lukan creations.

human: The goddess Athena was born from Zeus' head. Zeus seduced the goddess Hera by disguising himself as a cuckoo bird (although I'm not sure why that was seductive). He gave birth to Dionysus from his thigh. These "gods" weren't very nice folks, either: Cronus swallowed his children when they were born; Zeus escaped but family systems theory apparently rings true even in the Greek pantheon for he not only swallowed his children but also his pregnant wife.² One wonders why followers of such so-called "gods" would see the Christian nativity narrative as unseemly (!) but they did, and they mocked early Christians for worshiping such a low-class God who would suffer such self-debasement as to come into this world in the guise of a squalling infant.

But my friends, tonight let us say this: Thanks be to God that that is how it happened! The birth story of Jesus reminds us ever and always that God is indeed not aloof from creation, not un-caring, but so loved this world that God became one of us. And that is always, always our reminder that we should never seek to go too far in sanitizing the story, in making Jesus so transcendently winsome that He does not know what it is like to live as a human. For as a professor of mine long ago said, "If God is only transcendent, such a god doesn't really care for us; but if God is only human like the rest of us, such a God is unable to save us."³ But the Christmas story as Luke tells it is indeed the story of a God who is both all-encompassing unconditional love **and** a human life that is born and lives in the way that all humans get themselves born. It is the story of both the magnificent transcendence of stars and angels, and the down-to-earth realities of grubby shepherds and smelly animal stalls.

²<http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/grecoromanmyth1/a/OlympiansEmerge.htm>

³Dr. Clark Williamson, now Professor Emeritus at Christian Theological Seminary, Indianapolis, Indiana.

And thank God for that. The very human Jesus – born to parents under the dominion of an oppressive empire, soon to be refugees fleeing government-sponsored terror – reminds us that the children of Aleppo, and the children who go to bed hungry in this community, and the scores of teenagers in this city forced into the streets by their parents when they reveal their sexual orientation and which part of our offering tonight is meant to assuage, and the millions of children who die each year around the world for lack of clean water are our brothers and sisters too. And we dare not so sanitize and transcendentalize and pretty up the story that we love Jesus but not these other ones as well. For the unconditional love of God for each and all and God's demand for justice to each and all⁴ did indeed come to earth to save us and to challenge us to share that love and help enact that justice.

Luke tells us that Mary and Joseph were headed to Bethlehem in response to what he called the “first census” ordered by the governor.⁵ But, my friends, it is not the last census. For Christmas comes to us as a wondrous gift, “veiled in flesh the Godhead see,” as the carol puts it. It comes to us as amazing and unstinting grace, whereby you and I have been grafted on to God's people who also knew that grace from the summit of Mt. Sinai. But it also comes to us, as it were, as a new census; for you see, we too are invited to joyfully and gratefully count ourselves among those who will continue the work of that Babe of Bethlehem. As the great American preacher and poet Howard Thurman wrote:

When the song of the angels is stilled,

⁴Another debt to Professor Williamson: this is his formulation of what the “norm of the Gospel” is.

⁵Again, I am of course aware that it is likely that such a census never took place in the way described and is, again, a Lukan interpolation for the purpose of advancing his understanding of the gospel

when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.

May it be so. May it be so! Merry Christmas!