

Jeffrey A. Johnson
Christmas at the Stable
Christmas Eve
December 24, 2018

Commentary following the reading of Luke 2:1-3...

This story is hard for us to imagine but I'd like you to try. You see, we live in a free country and we take for granted that no one can order us around. But that wasn't the case at the time Jesus was born. The people of that time—Jesus' own people, the Jews—were living under a cruel government. Much of the money they earned was being taken away by the Roman government which was ruling them at the time. Soldiers would rush into town on their horses, brandishing their swords and spears and take by force the little bit of money the people had managed to save—and if they couldn't pay anything, they would sometimes take their children to be sold as slaves. We don't like to think about these things at Christmastime but, if we don't, we won't understand as well what God was doing to save His people.

It was a terrible time. You see when Caesar Augustus—he would be like the president of that time—ordered that everyone needed to go to their hometown to sign-up, the people weren't sure why this order had been given. Were they going to be taxed even more? Was there going to be some kind of draft, that means the government forcing people to work for them? Was Caesar going to separate families, maybe even killing those who were old or sick? No one knew but everyone was scared. It was a bad time.

Commentary following the reading of Luke 2:4-7...

We're here on the ranch tonight, meeting in this place, because I want us to imagine what it might have been like for poor Joseph and Mary. They hadn't traveled much before, maybe not even at all. And they weren't even used to each other as a couple. Their relationship had been strained when Joseph found out that Mary was pregnant—and he knew he wasn't the father. But yet an angel had appeared to Joseph in a dream telling him that the Child Mary was carrying was a special Child—and he should not hesitate to continue his relationship with her. He should take her as his wife. And so Joseph, because he was a good and God-fearing man, did.

But Mary's pregnancy was no excuse for disobeying the government's order that every man should go to his hometown with his family to sign-up for whatever the government was going to do. And so they began the long journey on foot. The Bible doesn't tell us that Mary rode a donkey but perhaps she did. That's the animal that poor people might have owned and it's doubtful that Mary could have walked that long way by herself.

It was a 90-mile trip. How many of you have been to Flagstaff? Well, Flagstaff is 90 miles from Holbrook. Can you imagine walking all that way? We can drive that distance in 1 ½ hours but if you had to walk all the way, how long do you think it would have taken you? Two days? Three? More? With Mary being pregnant, they couldn't have rushed. And remember, too: the countryside through which they were walking wasn't flat. It wasn't like going from here

to Flagstaff were the land is pretty level; no, this was hill country. There were constant ups-and-downs. It was a tough journey.

When they finally arrived at Bethlehem, we can imagine that they were exhausted—worn out from the journey. Who knows whether they even had enough to eat. At some point, Mary’s labor started. Remember, this is a first-time mother. She may have witnessed other births but this is a whole new experience for her. And her mother, aunties, grandmother and neighbor women—none of the people who would normally be there to see her through the birth—weren’t there. It was only Joseph.

Oh, how scared these two young people must have been! And then, because everyone was traveling to their hometowns, they couldn’t find a motel in which to stay. All the rooms were full! Imagine Joseph going, desperately, from door to door, beginning for accommodations. How very frightening for this poor couple!

In the nick of time, they find refuge in a barn—a place where animals were kept. No help, no bed, no water, no doctor, no nothing—but a baby doesn’t wait. When it’s ready to be born, he or she comes. And in this case, it was a Boy. And this young mother, scared and exhausted as she must have been, took that little, naked, shivering, wet baby and wrapped him in some clothes she had—nothing more than rags, rally—and put him down in a feeding trough for the animals. Oh, my!

Commentary following the reading of Luke 2:8-14...

Now, outside of town, outside of Bethlehem, there were men who were in the fields watching over their sheep. It was nighttime. There were coyotes and bobcats—or the equivalent—in those days and those sheep, needed to be protected from them. That was the shepherds’ job. To keep the sheep safe because, you see, those sheep were their income—or more probably, the income of the masters who owned them. The shepherds were, most likely, hired help. They, too, like Mary and Joseph, were poor. They were used to the drudgery of hard work and staying awake and being cold. Are you a little chilly tonight? I imagine those shepherds would have been, too.

But then something happened to take their minds off being cold or worrying about predators. An angel from God came and stood before them. Do know, don’t you, that an angel is a messenger? Well, when this messenger from God came and stood among them—and who knows how he looked? Was he glowing? Did he look like a human or like some other kind of creature? The Bible doesn’t tell us—but that angels must have been fearsome looking because the Bible tells us...what? (Solicit answer.) That’s right: those shepherds were afraid. One of the songs we sing at Christmas says the shepherds “feared and trembled.” I’ll bet they did!

But the angel tells them not to be afraid. And then that angel tells them something wonderful has happened. I’ll bet some of you have these words memorized, or nearly so. If you know these words, say them along with me: *“For behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy which will be to all the people. For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Savior,*

who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign to you: You will find a Babe wrapped in swaddling cloths, lying in a manger.”

Oh, my goodness! I get shivers just imagining what those shepherds were thinking and feeling when this strange and fearsome creature spoke to them as he did. They had never, in all their born days, experienced anything like this.

And as if that wasn't enough, suddenly the sky was filled with hundreds of other angels, singing and praising God. If I was one of those shepherds, I think I would have fallen to my knees (demonstrate this) in wonder and in fear. What was happening? This was crazy! What's going on here?

Commentary following the reading of Luke 2:15-20...

I don't know who stayed behind to watch the sheep but several of these men hightailed it into town. They wanted to see for themselves if what the angel said was true. And when I say they hightailed it, I mean that: they moved, they might have even run. How they found Joseph, Mary and the Baby Jesus is another miracle of that night. Now Bethlehem was only a village, just a few hundred people—maybe the size of Woodruff—but still, how did the shepherds know where to look for the Holy Family.

Well, if angels had filled the sky with God's praises, I'm just sure God would have directed them exactly to the barn where this young couple and their newborn were staying. And what would Mary and Joseph have thought when these strange men come barging into the barn? It was a night full of strange things.

And what did those shepherds think? He would have looked like an ordinary baby. No halo around his head as some pietist artists have painted. No, he was just a little baby boy—like this (referring to Cash). But they knew, because of the angelic appearances and what the angel had said to them that this was no ordinary baby. No indeed.

Did they stay long? We don't know. Did they have any gift to bring to this Child? I doubt it. Sometime later, wise men from the East would bring gifts for the Child. But this we do know: When those shepherds left the barn that night, they couldn't keep this experience to themselves. They told everyone who would listen about the strange and marvelous experiences of that holy night. They were the first evangelists.

The Bible tells us that Mary, no doubt overwhelmed by all that had happened to her that special night, *“kept all these things and pondered them in her heart.”* What does that mean? (Solicit answer from a child.) Yes, we thought about all these things and never forget them. I'm sure she wondered what kind of Special Child was lying there in her arms, nursing at her breasts. What would He grow up to be?

We know the answer to that question but, at the time, neither she nor Joseph nor the shepherds nor anyone else knew what would become of this Child. But they knew He would be Someone Special.