

December 24, 2023
Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Home for Christmas”

“All went to their own towns to be registered.”

“I’ll be home for Christmas; you can count on me.”

That beloved song, popularized by Bing Crosby on his legendary *White Christmas* album in 1943, has become a staple among songs of the season and an inspiration for countless travelers who embark on journeys back to their hometowns to celebrate the joy of this season with their families. Christmas is one of the busiest travel times of the year, with people using all means of transportation so that they might celebrate the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ with the people they love, gathering around the Christmas tree to exchange presents, sharing a Christmas feast at the family dinner table, and giving thanks that once again *“Christmas eve will find me where the love light gleams.”* For many people, Christmas means coming home to share the joy of Christmas with the people they love.

But for many people, Christmas is not a homecoming but a time when they find themselves leaving home, forced by many reasons and circumstances to be far from those they love on this holy night. Many people are physically unable to undertake a journey to the family homestead, while others find such a trip financially untenable. Some are forced because of their occupations or other living situations to be far from home at Christmas; this is especially true for members of the military who are stationed in distant outposts where they keep watch for the sake of their country and those they love. Many people have occupations that necessitate their being on the job at Christmas; these people include hospital workers, police, firefighters, emergency response personnel, and utility workers who may be called out in an emergency. For families who are estranged from one another, not even the joy of Christmas will mend the hurt and bridge the chasms of division and mistrust. Like the narrator of the beloved Christmas song, for many people *“I’ll be home for Christmas if only in my dreams.”*

Anyone who must leave home or is away from family on this holy night are not alone, for the Christmas story centers on families who are forced to leave home at Christmas. The story of the birth of Jesus begins with the account of a massive relocation of thousands of families, because *“in those days a decree went out from*

Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered.” (Luke 2:1). Caesar Augustus reigned as emperor of the Roman Empire from 27 BC – AD 14 and was succeeded by Tiberias, who is mentioned in Luke 3:1. Luke goes on to report that *“this was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria”* (2:2). Luke’s details at the beginning of the Christmas Gospel have a theological rather than a historical purpose, locating the birth of Jesus within human history. A Roman census was vastly different from modern-day censuses that are taken periodically; for most of us, a census usually involves nothing more than answering questions online or returning a written form to Statistics Canada. But in Roman times, the announcement of a census meant that people were forced to leave their homes and travel back to their ancestral homelands to be registered; this meant that *“all went to their towns to be registered”* (2:3), even if the journey was unwelcome and arduous. Unlike those who during this season make travel plans so that *“I’ll be home for Christmas,”* those who are forced to travel to their ancestral homes for the Roman census are *leaving home* for the day we know as Christmas. Those who find themselves in unfamiliar and uncomfortable places seek to make a home in places not meant for human dwelling, longing for the comfort and familiarity of their homes and communities. A Roman decree was never welcome news, because it meant being forced to pack one’s bags and travel to a faraway place so that the occupying empire might extract even more taxes from them.

Among the families who are forced to leave home at this time is a young couple from Nazareth who are expecting their first child. When they hear the news about Augustus’ census, they knew that this meant a journey to a city that was unfamiliar to them but was the ancestral homeland of the husband: *“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.”* (2:4). This is the first time we meet Joseph in Luke’s Gospel, but in Matthew we are introduced to him through his genealogy, which traces his family history back to Abraham and David, placing his future children in this lineage through which God would bless *“all the families of the earth.”* (Genesis 12:3). Joseph goes to be registered for the census in Bethlehem with Mary, *“to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child”* (2:5). We are introduced to Mary in the first chapter of this Gospel, when this young Jewish woman is visited by the angel Gabriel, who announces to her that she will give birth to a child who will be the fulfillment of God’s promises to the people of Mary and Joseph as well as people of all nations:

- “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God

will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” – 1:30-33.

In her response to the angelic annunciation – *“Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word”* (1:38) – Mary of Nazareth becomes the mother of our Lord Jesus Christ and the first disciple of her son, embodying the aspects of disciples which include hearing God’s Word and living in obedience to God’s commands. Mary will be praised by her relative Elizabeth when she visits the mother of John the Baptist, who will declare that *“blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb”* (1:42). In turn, Mary will sing out in praise of what God is doing for her and for all her people:

- “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for the mighty one has done great things for me, and holy is his name ... He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” – 1:46-55.

The expectant Mother of Our Lord certainly did not expect to embark on an arduous journey to an unknown destination in the final weeks of her pregnancy, but she becomes another victim of Augustus’ decree when she and Joseph leave Nazareth for Bethlehem, where they arrive as an inconspicuous couple and are treated no differently than any of the other displaced travelers arriving in the city of David against their wills. To them, Bethlehem is little more than a destination they had no intention or desire to visit; but it is not by accident that they find themselves giving birth to their firstborn son far from home, for Bethlehem figures prominently in the prophecy of Micah which speaks of this city as playing a key role in the fulfillment of God’s promise of a Messiah:

- “But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is of old, from ancient days. Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labour has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the LORD, in the majesty of the name of the LORD his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; and he shall be the one of peace.” – Micah 5:2-5a.

It is in this city of David, the ancestral home of Joseph, that *“the time came for her to deliver her child. 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.”* (2:6-7). Mary was probably not the only new mothers who had to place her newborn child in a makeshift crib; the city would have been so filled with other families who were forced out of their homes that those who also *“went to their own towns to be registered”* had to make a home in places that were not meant for human dwelling. For Mary, this meant laying her firstborn son who she had freshly wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger, a feeding trough for the animals for whom this stable had been built. In his being laid in a manger, *“Luke may be evoking an image of God feeding the world in the quiet birth of this unlikely Messiah”* (Lewis R. Donelson).

The birth of the child who is celebrated on this Christmas night as the fulfillment of God’s promise of the one who will be King of Kings and Lord of Lords was probably not noticed by anyone outside of that stable; the Holy Family was as inconspicuous and unnoticed as any other family who gave birth to a child during this forced relocation. They were as inconspicuous as another group of people who were dwelling outside of the City of David: *“In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night.”* (2:8). Shepherding was considered one of the least desirable occupations at this time; not only did being a shepherd take one away from home to lead their flocks to abundant grazing land, but shepherds had developed a reputation for being unreliable, untrustworthy, and cowardly, abandoning their flocks when a predator approached so that the sheep were helpless and doomed. (It is not by accident that Jesus refers to himself in John’s Gospel as the *Good Shepherd*, unlike a shepherd who *“does not care for the sheep, sees the wolf coming and runs away – and the wolf snatches them and scatters them”* – John 10:12). But it is to these shepherds, a group who were held in low esteem and as inconspicuous and unnoticed as the family gathered around the manger in Bethlehem, that the good news is announced when *“an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified”* (2:9). Terror was a typical response to an angelic appearance in the Bible; the women who come to the garden tomb and discover that the body of Jesus is missing are met by an angel whose message to them is *“do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.”* (Matthew 28:5-6). In similar fashion, the angel’s response to the terror of the shepherds is to reassure them and announce the wondrous news of what has happened in Bethlehem:

- “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” – 2:10-12.

The announcement of the angel focuses entirely on the messianic identity of Jesus: he is born in the city of David; he is a Saviour; he is the Messiah. The first people to hear this news are not the powerful, the wealthy, or those who are held in high esteem; the shepherds, who were held in low esteem in their day, are the first to hear the news of the birth of the Messiah and the first to witness the sight of “*a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’*” (2:13-14). It is these shepherds who have spent their lives as despised and unnoticed members of society who know that they have been blessed by this angelic message and have been chosen to “*go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.*” (2:15). They leave behind their flocks and dare enter the city of Bethlehem, risking the ridicule and derision of its residents who would not have welcomed the presence of angels among the “respectable people” of the city. But the shepherds are undeterred; “*they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.*” (2:16). When they laid their eyes upon the Holy Child, they shared the news of what the angel had told them, so that “*all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds had told them.*” (2:18). They would soon return to their flocks, but they would forever be changed; they knew that they were no longer people who were inconspicuous and unnoticed, despised and held in low esteem, for now they were people who were “*glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*” (2:20). They knew that it was “*to you*” – yes, even to lowly shepherds – that a child had been born who was the fulfillment of God’s promises, in whose birth “*the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*” (ELW Hymn 279).

- “According to the angel’s song, the Messiah’s birth conveys goodwill. No one is inconspicuous in the eyes of the Saviour. Jesus’ birth carries peace to those whom he favours. This pastoral word can compel households that once echoed with emptiness to resound with incomparable joy!” – Ashley Cook Cleere.

While many of us will be “home for Christmas” this year, there are many who find themselves far from home, far from places where they are loved, far from being welcomed and cherished on this day in which we celebrate “peace on earth, goodwill to all.” But the angelic proclamation that “*came upon the midnight clear*” is a

message of hope for those who must leave home or are far from a place to call home this Christmas:

- “And you, beneath life’s crushing load, whose forms are bending low, who toil along the climbing way with painful steps and slow: look now, for glad and golden hours come swiftly on the wing; oh, rest beside the weary road and hear the angel sing!” – ELW Hymn 282.

The good news of the birth of the Messiah is a message of hope for those who are home for Christmas and for those who are far from home or have never experienced a home where they are loved and accepted. The birth of the child of Mary fulfills the prophecy of Isaiah which promises that “*a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call him Emmanuel, God is with us.*” (Isaiah 7:14). The message of Christmas is the word of assurance that our Lord is with us always, that no matter where we may be in life, we have the assurance that we abide in our Saviour’s loving presence, and that “*neither life nor death shall ever from the Lord his children sever.*” (ELW Hymn 781). It is the word of blessed assurance that Jesus shares with his disciples, promising that “*those who love me will keep my word, and my father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them.*” (John 14:23). The birth of our Saviour is our sure and certain promise that no matter where we may find ourselves in life, we are always at home in the presence of the Lord, the one who is “*our help in ages past, our hope for years to come; our shelter from the stormy blast, and our eternal home.*” (ELW Hymn 632).

- “The angel does not simply say, Christ is born, but *to you* he is born, neither does he say I bring glad tidings, but *to you* I bring glad tidings of great joy. Furthermore, this joy was not to remain in Christ, but it shall be to all the people. For this reason Christ willed to be born, that through him we might be born anew.” – Martin Luther.

It is because of the good news we proclaim on this holy night – that “*Christ the Saviour is born*” – that all of us can sing that “*I’ll be home for Christmas,*” because no matter where we may find ourselves in this season we have the assurance that our Lord Emmanuel is with us, that our Saviour abides with us, and that we are always at home because our Redeemer is with us always. May our homecoming be joyful this Christmas as “*we hear the Christmas angel the great glad tidings tell; oh, come to us, abide with us, our Lord Emmanuel!*”

Amen.