

*Sermon for Christmas Day  
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Holy Nativity, Plano  
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The Christmas passage from Luke's Gospel is so familiar that we almost don't hear it anymore. There are people who have almost never been to church who recognize this passage. But there are so many cultural images associated with this story, that we sometimes get them all conflated. The stable, with all the animals, Mary and Joseph kneeling before the wooden manger, shepherds and angels, sometimes the Magi, are all a part of this frieze, this motionless scene etched into our minds by the countless visuals we have come across. Sometimes we need to be nudged out of that comfort zone.

To set the stage: About nine months ago, the archangel Gabriel informed Mary that she would bear this child that we celebrate today. She was an unmarried girl who trusted God, and God told her through the angel that he was going to fulfill his promises to Israel literally *through* her. It was a bit out of the blue. Remember that there had been no prophecy for about four hundred years. The Jews had finally learned, through the exile in Babylon, not to commit overt idolatry. But since the return, many had fallen into the less obvious idolatry of worshiping the rules that God had given them, rather than God himself. The pagan Romans controlled the Promised Land. They were more respectful of the local religion than the Greeks, but it was still humiliating for the servants of a supposedly omnipotent God.

And so the descendants of the great King David, Joseph and Mary, make the long trip to Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem. They are Jewish settlers in the gentile territory of the north. And Mary is very pregnant. But Caesar has spoken. And perhaps it is something of a blessing to have to make this journey. You see, Mary was found to be with child before the marriage had taken place. You can imagine what the scuttlebutt was in the zealous settlement town of Nazareth. The goody-goody Mary was finally exposed. "I wonder who the father is. That Joseph is a weakling. I wouldn't let a woman do that to me." But Joseph has had his own message from the Lord, and both of them are committed to pleasing God first, whatever other people think.

It is always this way. In this fallen world, obedience to God will always be accompanied by the painful reminders that all is not as it should be. God and sin mix like oil and water, and there is always sin around somewhere. So Joseph and Mary are taken by the political eddies of the world back to their family in Bethlehem. The journey is painful and difficult in Mary's condition. But perhaps it is a relief to get out of Nazareth and go home.

But when they get there, the family home is packed to the gills. Joseph is not the only member of the family to have moved away from Bethlehem. There are evidently brothers or cousins, or both, who have had to bring their families as well. The family house probably consists of a couple of rooms, one of which is set aside for special use, like for guests. But perhaps the shame of the illegitimate child is still with them. Someone else seems to be using the room set aside for honored guests, the room one might expect to use for child-birth.

The other room contains the hearth, and there are steps down to a lower dirt floor where the animals are brought in at night. But this room is the main living space in the house. This is where the normal business of life goes on. In any case, in both rooms, there are now people sleeping all over the floor, children running around in and out of the house, adults reviving old quarrels and connections. It's a family reunion in a small space.

And Mary gives birth to a son in the homestead, with everyone under foot and in the way. Again, it is a mixture of pain and goodness. We know from Genesis that the pain of childbirth is a result of the fall. And the eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity, chooses this route into the world. He is humble enough, not just to become one of us, but to come into the world in the midst of the pain and humiliation that we deal with every day: the pain of his mother in labor, the conflict aroused by his supposed illegitimacy, the humiliation of his family in being forced into this crowded reunion by a foreign power. And yet, from the very beginning he is surrounded by family. He was born into a community that knew to wrap him tightly in "swaddling cloths" to keep him from crying. And since there is no room for him and his mother in the guestroom, she places him in one of the animals' mangers, because that's the only place in the whole house he won't get stepped on.

You'll notice that I haven't mentioned anything about an innkeeper or a stable. That's because those things are not mentioned in the story. I'm afraid they are interpolations from a Western European culture. The word translated "inn" can mean a roadside lodging house that would have been used by Roman officials and traveling merchants. But it is also used to mean just such a guestroom as I have described in a normal family dwelling. In the culture of Palestine, hospitality was a sacred responsibility. And Joseph was born in Bethlehem. It is almost inconceivable that he wouldn't have had family still in town.

The "innkeeper and stable" version of the story emphasizes that Jesus was born under depressingly humiliating circumstances. And then some commentators compound that error by suggesting that the stable was really a blessing, because it created a sort of sacred space, a private place where Jesus could be born apart from the cares and occupations of the great unwashed, separated from the rest of humanity, as befits a great king.

But that's not the point at all. There are a few remarkable events, like the army of angels shown to the shepherds, and later the Magi's appearance. And the forced family reunion isn't an everyday arrangement, although it wasn't unique. But the overwhelming sense we get if we read the story for what it actually *says* is that Jesus was born into amazingly *ordinary* circumstances. Definitely not rich, but not desperately poor. Born into a family and to parents who have their own difficulties and trials and heartbreaks. Born to a basically responsible family that knows how to care for an infant. Born into the very heart of human life, to share it completely with us.

This is not to say that Jesus cannot connect with people who don't have even that much going for them. It is to say that normal human life already contains enough pain and temptation to encompass it all. Life in a fallen world among fallen people, including oneself, is hard. And Jesus is ordinary enough to connect with everyone. He is truly human.

The heavenly army; the virgin birth; the gold, frankincense, and myrrh; these are all things that point to who Jesus is. But even he doesn't know that yet. He is just a baby like any other baby. Beautiful and unique, like any other baby. Suffering hunger, fear, and frustration, just like any other baby.

The one person who seems to be getting it is his mother. Everyone else was amazed at what the shepherds said, "but Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart." In the midst of their ordinary life, Jesus' mother will be the one to tell him of all these things and start him on the path to understanding who he is. The "boy next door" at some point will come to the conclusion that he is the Lord.

We now celebrate his birth, knowing the rest of the story. We know that the Lord is now restored to his place in heaven. But we also know that, in a mystery, he has taken his complete humanity with him into the presence of the Father. There is no sorrow, pain, or temptation that he cannot understand or with which he cannot empathize.

And that is the way our Lord saved us. The most costly way. And the only way. Through the pain of ordinary human life to the absolute glory of divine life. And we are called to follow him.