

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 12/24/2023



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Christmas Eve/Day

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, December 24/25th

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20)

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Comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable

Luke's description of the birth of Jesus is the quintessential Christmas nativity narrative we are all familiar with. It is this familiarity and how this text has shaped our view of Christmas over our lives that may make us miss some of the intentional statements that God makes with this narrative. The birth of our Savior turned the entire world upside down. Rather than have the righteous and blameless priest, Zechariah, prepare the way, God used Zechariah's son, John the Baptist. Rather than use the temple, He called John into the wilderness. Rather than use Zechariah's wife Elizabeth to bear the Messiah child, He used an unknown peasant girl. Rather than Jerusalem as the place, God chose a backwater. Rather than announce the birth of Christ the Lord to the established religious hierarchy of the day, God chose to announce the good news to shepherds, an underclass of people who were excluded from the mainstream religious life. Rather than being made welcome in the guestroom, the birth itself happened in a stable. Rome, Jerusalem and established religious and political hierarchies were passed over in favor of the marginalized – people and places. The awe-inspiring God of all creation came to earth as a defenseless baby and showed us just how much He loves us and how we can have abundant life. The Kingdom that was established on this day continues to turn the world upside down, comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable.

Luke 2:1-14, (15-20) Commentary

¹ In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town.

Luke presents the birth of Christ in a historical context. Unlike Matthew focusing on Herod – more important to his Jewish audience - Luke takes a broader, Roman perspective. This is consistent with Luke's stated purpose of providing an "orderly account" to Theophilus, a possible Roman official who perhaps commissioned this work (1:3). Luke's writing was, of course, under the superintendence of the Holy Spirit. Many have noted some historical problems with the dating of Quirinius as governor of Syria and the registration/census. Some suggest grammatical support for the text to be read as "...this was the registration before Quirinius was governor..." (This is the alternative rendering given in the ESV.) which alleviates some of the difficulties. The irony in v.1 is Caesar Augustus was considered a god who ushered in a reign of peace and salvation, the *Pax Romana*. While Augustus was at the very highest level of human society, the Redeemer of the Cosmos added human nature to His divine

nature and was born into the lowliest level of human society. Ironically, Rome still only exists today as a global center because of the very church that Christ established. The Latin language that Caesar spoke is no longer practiced yet Jesus' words are translated into virtually every human language and dialect.

⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

These opening verses provide the reason why Joseph and Mary are in Bethlehem. They also confirm the lineage of Joseph being through the house of David. Bethlehem was David's ancestral home (1 Samuel 16:1). While Mary is very pregnant, she is still betrothed to Joseph and thus not yet married. To Luke's original audience, this translates as "scandalous." While in Bethlehem for the census registration, Mary gave birth to Jesus. There was no room in the inn or guest room of the house. Typically, a stable would be attached to homes. Above the stable would be a room which could be used as a guest room. Since the guest room was full, Mary and Joseph had to stay in the stable and use the feed trough (manger) as a crib. The fact that Mary wrapped the Baby Jesus in strips of cloth herself points to a lonely birth and a forerunner of the loneliness and rejection Christ would eventually face.

⁸ And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. ¹⁰ And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger."

Another irony here is the areas outside of Bethlehem were the location of the source of the lambs destined for use in the various temple sacrifices. The shepherds were tending flocks that ultimately would be used as sacrifices while the Lamb of God was just born close by. Shepherds, a class of people that had a bad reputation. Based on their lifestyle, they could not observe ceremonial laws and were thus considered unclean. As shepherds wandered about the country things would go missing. Shepherds were considered so unreliable they were not allowed to give testimony in a court of law.

It was to this class of undesirables that God sent His messenger – people who had no doubt given up on God, yet God had not given up on them. Some argue that these shepherds must have been devout men otherwise why would God bestow on them such a privilege. Unfortunately, this thinking confuses works with grace. God chose these shepherds the same way He chose Mary and Abraham... according to His good pleasure. This is why the messenger said the good news (*euangelion*, the Gospel, see Isaiah 40:9) is for all the people, not just the devout. This kind of thinking misses the whole idea of the Gospel!

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, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"

When the initial messenger appeared and the glory of the Lord shone around them, the shepherds were afraid. Imagine the sight when a whole heavenly army appeared praising God. Another irony here is a heavenly army bringing peace. Giving glory to God is a prerequisite for such peace. This is not a human peace. Later the crowds in

Jerusalem will welcome Jesus with: *“Blessed is the King who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!”* (19:38)

¹⁵ When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them.

The intensity of the experience causes the shepherds to leave their flocks to visit the Lamb of God and then tell the story – the first humans to proclaim the birth of Christ! There are parallels here to the disciples who will leave their boats and a tax collector who will leave his tax booth. These are life-changing experiences that compel people to tell others of what happened. It is the same today with the Gospel.

¹⁹ But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

How did Luke know Mary’s reaction? Some suggest Luke may have interviewed Mary or a close connection (1:2) as he set about to research his orderly account of these events.

Reflection and Action

I was brought up in a time and place where schools were connected to the church and celebrated the birth of Christ publicly. I remember participating in numerous annual nativity plays as a child. Beginning as the back end of a donkey, I aspired one day to be a shepherd or the inn keeper. Decades later, the childhood innocence of this scene presented in the lectionary text has not left me and offers many fond memories of Christmas during this season. However, through the more seasoned lens of my current vantage point in life, this text brings both comfort and affliction. And so it should.

The world is full of people who never find room at the inn - The brutal reality of life, even with modern technologies and economies, is most people live in poverty of some kind or another (financial, social, spiritual...). While the birth of Jesus is *“good news of great joy ... for all the people”* (v.11), Jesus came to the people left behind and excluded by the human power systems of the world. The power of the government relative to Mary and Joseph is illustrated by Luke referencing the need for them to be registered four times in five verses. God was making a clear statement about the nature of the Kingdom and how it contrasts our flawed human social systems – no matter how well-meaning they may be.

The Shepherds had Jobs – As a child, I never gave it a second thought that the Shepherds *“went with haste”* to Bethlehem to investigate what the Lord had made known to them (v.15). As we grow into adulthood, most of us must make a living. While thanks to Martin Luther, we now recognize how virtually all work can be a Christian vocation into which a Christian is called, we also recognize how following Christ can often put us at odds with the world and place our livelihoods at risk. Visiting the manger can get you fired! There is a worldly cost to discipleship, and we must make the choice. Discipleship is not a part time endeavor.

Caesar Augustus is alive and well – The idea of a divine emperor is no longer a view held by many in the world today but the idea of government having god-like powers is alive and well. The right of the Roman system to compel individuals to travel to their towns of origin for compulsory registration for taxation purposes seemed a bit draconian to a child growing up in the West. However, as one ages, the true nature of what really lies just beneath the surface of worldly power systems cannot be missed. This is even the case for those systems claiming to be benevolent.

The early Christians had two options for a divine source of peace and salvation. One was to worship the emperor and place all their trust in the *Pax Romana* initiated by the “divine” August Caesar. The other was to place all their trust in Christ. Being a Christian does not prevent one from being a good citizen. Being a Christian does often place you in conflict with the systems of injustice. Christians today have the same choice. Events of the last few years have revealed to many in the church which god or God they serve.

Sadness at what a spectacle Christ Mass has become – Looking back over the decades to those childhood Christmas times, I can hardly remember the presents. I know I always got what I wanted (within reason of course!) but what stands out now is how the whole community seemed to be transformed. People interacted differently with each other during the Christmas season. Through the eyes of a child and remembered by the adult, Christmas seemed more about relationships, both vertical and horizontal.

As an adult, Christmas appears to be nothing more than a secular marketing season of great importance to the consumer economy and the giant temples of consumerism – the shopping malls. Like the money changers in Herod’s temple, businesses go to extreme lengths to exploit people who feel compelled to fulfill their social obligations. In the words of CS Lewis, “*Can it really be my duty to buy and receive masses of junk every winter just to help the shopkeepers? If the worst comes to the worst I’d sooner give them money for nothing and write it off as a charity.*” It is often the financially underprivileged who are particularly at risk. Many people go and stay in debt as a response to the celebration of a movement that began with a man who advocated a very different economy.

The god of consumerism requires great sacrifices. In the zealous pursuit of the lowest cost production, factories have combed the world in search of slave-like labor. All that remains of once-thriving communities are crumbling, vacant buildings, growing substance abuse problems and the myriad of other ills that follow. We traded the worship of the divine for glorifying and worshiping the self. You can see the daily offerings left on the altars of Facebook or Instagram – symbols of perfect lives by imperfect people who are empty and hurting. The god of consumerism brings only emptiness, isolation, despair, and depression.

The best Christmas present anyone can receive is the love that came down from heaven and still dwells in our midst. Such love cannot be demonstrated by a gift found in a mall or online retailer. We may also remember that acting on this love brings more joy than can be achieved through the consumption of anything this world has to offer. As a bonus, no money is needed for this gift – the debt has already been paid.

As Christians, we don’t just celebrate the nativity, we participate in it - To quote Meister Eckhart, a Dominican theologian, philosopher, and mystic who lived in the 13th and 14th centuries, “We are all meant to be mothers of God, for God is always needing to be born.” By this he meant that to be Christian, it is not enough just to know the story of the nativity. The birth of Christ must occur in our own souls. Christ is manifested in this world through us. As the hands and feet of Christ, we reflect the light of the world in our community. When the seed of the faith sown in our hearts becomes fully formed and we turn our lives over to God, the nativity takes on new meaning. In that moment we shift from being mere observers of this cosmic story of God’s goodness and mercy to becoming an integral part of it. We no longer remember the nativity, we become the very witnesses to the nativity in our time and place.

Merry Christmas!