

## Infant Holy, Infant Lowly

### A Prep Guide for “Anticipating” Session 3

As we approach our third and final session together, the notes below should give you some inroads to our conversation. Enjoy!

#### A Big Stage

The first few verses of Luke 2 speak to the surprising significance of Jesus's birth.

Have you ever discovered a very big thing in a very small place? Maybe you saw a magnificent play in a lowly off -off -off -Broadway theatre or in a back street of your city. Or a Carnegie-Hall-quality voice in a church pageant. Or you are an English teacher grading a pile of mediocre papers when you suddenly come across a Dickens in the making.

Luke tells backwater Jesus's story on a big stage. He does this sometimes subtly, as he paints Jesus with “colors” usually reserved for [Socrates, the great Athenian philosopher, or other Greek and Roman heroes](#). But sometimes Luke is more blatant. He contexts Jesus's birth within the events of world history. The whole drama begins when the Roman Emperor, Caesar Augustus, orders a census. The words are familiar.

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. (Luke 2.1-2)*

While a Roman Emperor runs the whole world, the Savior of that whole world is born in a back-alley cattle stall. After 20 centuries, this all seems normal to us. We've heard the story every Christmas all our lives. But, when Luke wrote, Christianity was a mosquito on the elephant of Roman religion and society. The Augustus reference is a bold stroke, and when Luke introduces John he gets even more brash:

*In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler \* of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high - priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. (Luke 3.1-2)*

Years have passed, and the Empire has changed hands to Tiberius Caesar, but the message is the same. The spotlight of divine focus pans around the world from Rome to Judea and Galilee to the territories surrounding those two regions, and then fixes its focus on a crazy, lone Jewish prophet in the desert.

Finally, when it comes time to trace Jesus' family tree, Luke casts his eyes back farther than the Gospel of Matthew does. He speeds through the great King David and does not even slow down at Abraham and Sarah. The reach of this life will be cosmic, so the ancestors that matter are not Israel -specific. Here's a

*Jesus was about thirty years old when he began his work. He was the son (as was thought) of Joseph son of Heli, son of Matthat, son of Levi...son of David...son of Jacob, son of Isaac, son of Abraham...son of Shem, son of Noah, son of Lamech, son of Methuselah, son of Enoch, son of Jared, son of Mahalaleel, son of Cainan, son of Enos, son of Seth, son of Adam, son of God.*

The appropriate ancestors for this story, which will move travel all the way to the center of the Empire by the end of Acts – are Adam and Eve...and ultimately God.

The message on and between Luke's lines is clear: the God of the universe will shock the world by showing up where we would not have expected it. This little baby Jesus from this humble family will be more significant than Roman emperors and Jewish patriarchs. And it all came to pass in the "Little Town of Bethlehem."

### **Timing**

When Luke writes that Quirinius was governor of Syria AND the Emperor Augustus decreed a tax registration AND Matthew has King Herod the Great play his part, close attention prompts a double take.

"Quirinius' Census – 6 CE (Prompted a Zealot uprising) (Luke 2.1-2)  
Reign of Herod the Great – through his death in 4 BCE (Matthew 1 –2)

There appears to be no overlap between Herod's reign and the time Quirinius spent as governor of Syria. We'll discuss the various theories on Thursday evening.

### **Time of Year**

When we gather for class on Thursday evening, we will have precisely 6 shopping days left 'til December 25. But who decided that was Jesus's birthday? We first hear of a December 25 date for Jesus's birth from the Roman churchman Hippolytus, in his commentary on the Book of Daniel.

The way our shepherds are behaving in this narrative suggest another time of year for Jesus's birth.

"The shepherds must have been in the fields at a time when the fields were fallow — that is, after harvest and before plowing and planting. There is a symbiotic relationship: sheep and goats (flocks are nearly always mixed) graze on the stubble

of the harvested wheat and barley fields and in the process fertilize the field for the next cycle of plowing and planting.

“While not negating the age -old tension between farmers and shepherds over land use, within the confines of a village, their relationship is mutually dependent and usually beneficial. Based on the weather patterns of Israel, the season between harvest and plowing is summer through early autumn (June/July through September/October).”

Holidays land where they land, and I wish you both a blessed December 25 and a special blessing on the anniversary of whichever June to October day actually saw Jesus’s birth.

### **Shepherds and Kings**

Speaking of shepherds, the great King David, the most revered royal in the history of Israel, famously grew up as a devoted minder of sheep near Bethlehem. A thousand years later, his great -great-great-great-great grandson Joseph was forced by imperial decree to check in at home for a tax registration. Both Matthew and Luke feature the descent of Jesus through his father’s once -royal family.

And so Luke identifies the place of Jesus’s birth:

“So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child.” (Luke 2.4-5)

The scene is so familiar that we could cast and direct the show ourselves: Mary and Joseph arrive on a donkey, inquire at an inn, and, after the shaking of a forbidding finger, must search for other lodging in a random cattle stall. Cue angels who summon shepherds and a star that guides magi, and presto: a pageant.

Linguists and cultural scholars a like have pictured the setting of Jesus’s birth a little differently. First, Kenneth Bailey, a respected expert on the mores of ancient Palestine doesn’t buy the notion that Joseph’s family would leave this young couple to fend for themselves.

“Even if he has never been there before he can appear suddenly at the home of a distant cousin, recite his genealogy, and he is among friends. Joseph had only to say, “I am Joseph, son of Jacob, son of Matthan, son of Eleazar, the son of Eliud,” and the immediate response must have been, “You are welcome. What can we do for you?” If Joseph did have some member of the extended family resident in the village, he was honor-bound to seek them out. Furthermore, if he did not have family or friends in the village , as a member of the famous house of David, for the “sake of David,” he

would still be welcomed into almost any village home." ( *Jesus Through Middle-Eastern Eyes*)

Next, there is the most common architecture of homes in the region. They normally consisted of one main room in which the family lived and, sometimes, a spare room (Greek: KATALUMA) in which they could host guests. Also normal to ancient homes would have been a nearness to the animals who helped families subsist. These led William Thompson 170 years ago to a picture of that first Christmas eve.

"It is my impression that the birth actually took place in an ordinary house of some common peasant, and that the baby was laid in one of the mangers, such as are still found in the dwellings of farmers in this region."

No offense to pageant -producers everywhere, but Joseph and Mary likely stayed in the guest room of familiars and laid their newborn in a manger that served the animals therein.

### **Discerning the Family's Social Class**

Even if we don't include the rejection of haughty innkeeper and refuge taken in a cave (some Christian tradition from early on) or labor and delivery happening in a desolate barn, Joseph and Mary's social place becomes clear eventually in the narrative of Luke 2. This faithful Jewish couple circumcises their son on the eighth day according to Torah law. Then, when the time comes for Mary's purification ritual and sacrifice, they make a choice that gives us access to the size of their bank account.

"When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle doves or two young pigeons.' (Lk 2.22 -24)

Leviticus 14 describes the proper purification sacrifice for a woman 40 days after the birth of her child:

*"When the days of her purification for a son or daughter are over, she is to bring to the priest at the entrance to the tent of meeting a year -old lamb for a burnt offering and a young pigeon or a dove for a sin offering. He shall offer them before the Lord to make atonement for her, and then she will be ceremonially clean from her flow of blood.*

*"These are the regulations for the woman who gives birth to a boy or a girl. But if she cannot afford a lamb, she is to bring two doves or two young pigeons, one for a*

*burnt offering and the other for a sin offering. In this way the priest will make atonement for her, and she will be clean.”* (Leviticus 14.6-8)

Joseph and Mary chose the ancient equivalent of subsidized school lunches for low - income families.

### **The Birth Itself**

And so we arrive at the moment angels anticipated and shepherds witnessed:

*While Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.*

*And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”*

*Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying,*

*“Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.”*

*When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.”*

*So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told. (Luke 2.6-20)*

We'll pick up more details on Thursday evening. For now, peace and good will to you all!

## Trying Travel

### Mediation on the Road to Bethlehem

#### Rev. Dr. Allen Hilton

Triple A predicts that over 120 million Americans will drive, ride, or fly at least 50 miles from where they live for the holiday – a record number yet again. Air travel should also break records, with eight million flying between on the three days including Christmas. We are accustomed to traversing large distances in short times, and we do it a lot in these weeks surrounding the nativity of Jesus.

Travel is quite literally in the air for many of us, so my mind runs to the very different, much more earthy travel experience of Joseph and Mary on the occasion of their son's birth.

Liz and I have traveled to two births. When our elder son Sam came along, Liz and I drove our green Isuzu Trooper the 22 miles from New Canaan to Danbury Hospital in CT. It took us 30 minutes. For the appearing of our younger son, Isaac, the auto was a blue Subaru Outback and it was 10 miles in 15 minutes. Both of these red -letter events called us out of our comfortable and familiar beds and into the care of trained medical staffs who we knew would be there. We had even practice -driven to Danbury, because our Lamaze coach told us to. All these conveniences, all of these creature comforts, were there for us, and each birth was still utterly nerve -wracking — and beautiful.

Joseph and Mary traveled 90 rough miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem, probably at a 10-14 mile-per day clip, since she was pregnant and they were walking. That meant seven to nine days on a dusty road, all because a high -and-mighty Caesar said they had to. To speak the obvious, there were no phone calls or texts to reassure them, no weather reports to help them prepare. The roads were crowded with others traveling to their ancestral home, and the Joseph family compound in Bethlehem was surely packed when they arrived. They had no doctor, of course — only extended family with life experience.

It must have been an anxious and frantic time for them. I have trouble imagining how that sort of uncertainty would feel for two first -time parents. The classic sit -com or rom -com “delivered by a cab driver” scene scores comedic points with us, but I don't think this unsettling unfamiliarity would have been funny at all for that ancient couple. The unfamiliar and the unpredictable are two things you don't want when a soon-to-be mother's water breaks.

Their maternity journey was light years from ours. In fact, the relief and joy of a healthy birth may be the only thing our experience has in common with the Luke 2 story of the holy family. Many of you can relate to the relief and joy. But the similarity doesn't last long. As we scan back to their ancient scene, lights flash and heavenly voices sing in a field nearby and it's not long 'til shepherds show up at the manger. To underestimate, Liz and I didn't have that, either.

I draw on our family's two births, because it gives me some (admittedly very distant) connection to the drama of Joseph and Mary's arrangements, anticipation, and uncertainty on the original Eve. You and I sing "O Little Town of Bethlehem" and "What Child Is This?" each December, and we replay the details in our pageants, but it still takes hard work for me to remember that the coming of Joseph's and Mary's first child was not a performance or a song - writer's inspiration. This was a pre - technology, flesh - and - blood - and - sweat, spiritually and psychologically taxing, messy and anxious birth. These expectant parents never would have chosen this journey. When I forget this, I lose access to the uncertainty and vulnerability that incarnation brings with it.

You and I are more than two millennia removed from Joseph and Mary's Bethlehem journey. As we celebrate in 2025, what will usher you far enough into their anxious, awesome experience of that ancient night? What imaginings will bring their experience to you rs? Whatever kindles your creativity, may God bless and deepen your celebration of that faraway, freighted, frenzied, fantastic night in Bethlehem.