

A Storytelling Commentary on Luke 2:1-20

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In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to be registered, each to their own ancestral city.

Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth,
to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem,
because he was descended from the house and family of David,
to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was pregnant.

While they were there, the time came for her to give birth.
And she gave birth to her firstborn son
and wrapped him in swaddling clothes,
and laid him in a manger,
because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord stood before them,
and the glory of the Lord shone around them,
and they were terrified.

But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid;
for look, 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 Savior,
who is the Messiah, the Lord.

This will be a sign for you:
You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths
and lying in a manger."

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
"Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among all people whom God favors!"

This is a story of great joy with the promise of peace. However, the telling of this story should not romantic. It is not all about warm fuzzies. There are warm fuzzy moments in the story, but it is also highly political. It is a story that is embedded in the political history of Israel in the first century.

For storytelling purposes, I have made significant modifications to the NRSV translation of this story. I have changed words in order to preserve verbal threads, to have as few words as possible, and also to maintain as many of the connotations of this story from the history of translation as possible. Specifically, I have kept "swaddling clothes" rather than "bands of cloth" and "manger" rather than "feeding trough." I agree with the NRSV that "registration" is a better translation than "enrollment." Note the rhythm of the geography in my sound map: "They went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem."

The memory structures in this story really make a big difference if you notice them in learning the story. There are seven episodes, so as usual it's a good idea to focus on the structure. If you focus on that structure, this is an easy story to learn. The major issue will be making modifications in the translation that we already know. The sound map that I have provided in the structuring of the story in episodes will help to identify those things.

These are the episodes:

1. Registration
2. Birth
3. Appearance to the shepherds
4. Announcement of the good news
5. Angel choir
6. Shepherds going and finding the child and announcing what they had been told
7. Responses: everyone, Mary, the shepherds

Some of the major verbal threads:

1. Registration
2. Swaddling clothes
3. Baby lying in a manger

The major dynamic of this story is the experience of Roman oppression in the registration. The context as stated in the opening sentence is not nice. It was a time of major rebellion. The movement of the story's plot is from that political setting, to the birth, and to the moment of great intimacy of laying the baby in a manger, then to the announcement to the shepherds and their going to see the baby. This is a wonderful story to tell and is probably the most frequently told story in the Bible among Christians.

The first episode is about the decree of Caesar Augustus. The NRSV translates the name as "Emperor Augustus" but that eliminates the primary associations with the word "Caesar" so I have kept this older word in my sound map. Caesar was a name of tremendous importance and its associations are of greater significance than those of "Emperor."

The title "Caesar" began as a family name. Octavian, later called Augustus, was the nephew of Julius Caesar and was declared a God after his death as was Julius. A primary dynamic in this story is that Jesus is announced as a savior, Christ, the lord. Luke's implicit affirmation is that Jesus will be the emperor of the world rather than Augustus Caesar, who was also called by the titles, savior and lord.

In the background of this story is a picture of Caesar Augustus writing out a decree which would be copied and sent to all of the provinces. It would be read aloud in all of these central cities and then distributed and read aloud in all the towns. The registration of all people in the Roman Empire was an enormous task. It was also hated, as with all implementation of taxes throughout history by dominant powers over subject peoples.

The decree was written, sent out, read aloud, and then enforced. Anyone who didn't register would be subject to major penalties including the possibility of death. The census had as its purpose increasing tax revenues by better administration and by making sure that nobody got by without paying the taxes. In response to the census, there was a major revolt in Galilee led by Judas the Galilean in 6 C.E. The rebellion was put down with typical Roman efficiency. Hundreds of rebels were captured and killed. The roads of Galilee were lined with crosses of those who were crucified by the Romans for this “treason.”

The date of that rebellion and of Quirinius being the governor of Syria was 6 C.E. However, we know that Herod died in 4 B.C.E. Therefore, the historicity of this story is very ambiguous. We really don't know exactly when Jesus was born; we can only estimate. There were no records of Jesus' birth as we would keep today. It is likely that Luke, who was composing his gospel sometime in the 80's, more than 50 years after Jesus' death and some 80 years after his birth, associated Jesus' birth with the major political developments of the period. Those were the reign of Herod the Great and the revolt of Judas the Galilean at the time of Quirinius.

For the registration, everybody was required to go back to where they came from, to the ancestral center of their family. People in this period were very mobile. They moved all over the Roman Empire seeking better jobs and better living situations. The majority of Jews lived outside Palestine in various neighboring countries. Many whose ancestors had lived in Judea had moved to Galilee.

This was apparently the case with Joseph, for Joseph had to go to Bethlehem in order to register. He went “up” from the region of Galilee—that is, up into the mountains—to the region of Judea. From the city of Nazareth he would travel south probably a week's journey with his pregnant fiancée, and remain in Bethlehem three or four days. They would travel down the east bank of the Jordan to avoid going through Samaria, through Jericho up the mountain road to Jerusalem, and then on past Jerusalem to Bethlehem.

Thus, Jesus' parents experienced Roman administration and Roman oppression. Jesus was born in the midst of this action of Roman imperial domination of the provinces by collecting taxes that went straight to Rome and built Rome but did nothing for the subject people. This first episode needs to be told from the perspective of those who were the victims of Roman domination, not as the great warm fuzzies of our old buddy Caesar Augustus. That was not how the story was experienced or told by Jews in the first century.

The long sentence of the journey to Bethlehem has within it the dynamics of the journey and you want to capture that in the tempo. It is also important to keep the sentence moving because it is long. The associations with David are associations with the traditions of the messiahs of Israel and are highly positive. Going up to Bethlehem and being born in Bethlehem was a sign of Jesus' messianic identity. It was associated with

all the memories of David's reign some one thousand years before Jesus and the period of Israel's greatest power and prosperity.

The associations with Mary are related to the earlier stories in Luke's Gospel about the annunciation—the announcement to Mary by Gabriel that she would give birth to a son conceived by the Holy Spirit, and her visit with Elizabeth when she sang her historic song, *The Magnificat*. There has been a high degree of identification created with Mary earlier in the Gospel and you want to draw on that in telling this story: "He went up to be registered with Mary, his betrothed (you remember all those stories before), who was pregnant."

For Joseph to go to his ancestral home with his pregnant fiancée who is about to give birth was not normal everyday practice in relation to what young men were supposed to do. You weren't supposed to get your betrothed pregnant; there is discomfort and shame associated with this description. It was downright inconvenient and hard for Mary and Joseph, which is reflected in the fact that in Joseph's ancestral home, nobody took them in and they had "no place."

In a normal situation a young woman who is going to give birth to a child in the ancestral home of her husband would be taken care of by all the women in the family. That was not the case for Mary. She gave birth and laid her son in a feeding trough for animals because there was no place for them in the inn, which also meant there was no place for them in the homes of the families of Joseph. "While they were there" implies hardship and shame. It was not the best time for the baby to be born.

The birth of a firstborn son was a big deal in every family. Swaddling clothes were bands of cloth that were wrapped around the limbs of the baby to keep them safe and warm. Wrapping an infant in swaddling clothes was an ancient practice. It was an act of love and care. The manger was a feeding trough where hay and oats would be put for the animals to eat.

The moment of laying Jesus in a manger is a moment of great intimacy and warmth in the story. It's like the end of the story of the appearance to Joseph (in Matthew) when he woke from sleep. Joseph did what had been commanded him by the angel and took Mary as his wife but did not know her until she had given birth to a son, "and he named him Jesus." In telling that, the gesture is to hold the baby Jesus in your arms.

The same dynamic is present in this story: "She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes..."—you can wrap the baby and hold him—"...and laid him ..."—pantomime the action as a moment of intimacy and—"...in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." At this conclusion, your tone and facial expression might change to one of surprise and/or dismay. There is nothing normal about the baby being laid in a manger.

The shepherds were the scum balls of their day in relation to vocational status. There is a tradition in the Mishnah that a father should not recommend certain vocations to his sons: first, not to be a butcher; second, not to be a doctor; and the third, not to be a shepherd. Shepherds were among the least respected vocations in the first century. The doctors were charlatans and magicians and were soundly dismissed. They made a lot of money but were not respected at all in Jewish community. Butchers of course were unclean because of being in constant contact with blood. And then there was being a shepherd. They had no status. These were lower class guys out in the fields keeping watch over their flocks. The literal translation is that they were actually living in the fields.

The appearance of the angel of the Lord was frightening. The story of Balaam (Numbers 22: 23-35) is in the background here, when he saw the angel that had been blocking his way with a sword and his donkey had saved his life by holding up. When Balaam finally saw the angel with a sword, he fell on his face in terror. That's a normal response to an appearance by an angel because generally angels meant bad news. Their appearance meant that you were in deep trouble. This is why the angel responds, "Don't be afraid; I have good news for you." Fear is generally associated with the appearance of angels (for example, Zechariah in Luke 1:11-13).

The announcement of the angel is truly good news. The first reference is to all the people, "What I have for you is good news for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. The word order in Greek here is important: Savior, Messiah, Lord. It may be that the reference here to "all people" means to all human beings, but in light of the earlier songs in Luke that refer to Israel over against the Gentiles, it probably means here all the Jewish people. The sign that will confirm this good news is a baby wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. The signifying element is the baby in a manger. Peace for "all people" comes in the song of the angelic hosts.

The angel choir is associated in the memories of the people who heard the story with the angels of God ascending and descending on Jacob's ladder. It is communication between the heavens and the earth. The angel choir sings praises to God: "Glory to God in the highest heaven," and then "on earth peace." The translation is more inclusive than we might assume. "Peace to all men," that is, all human beings, who are the objects of God's favor. It does not mean peace among people of good will as if people of ill will are excluded, or people of God's favor with the implication that there are some people who are not in God's favor. The meaning is peace for the world, for all people. All people are, in Jesus' birth, the objects of God's favor, of God's grace, and of God's desire and commitment to peace.

God's will for inclusive peace is an announcement of a theme that gets developed in Luke's Gospel in very explicit ways. A clear sign is Jesus' first sermon when he announces that the blessings of the kingdom of God will be extended to the enemies of Israel by citing two stories from the scriptural tradition: Elijah taking food and being fed

at the home of the widow of Zeraphath in the enemy land of Sidon, and also Naaman the general of the Syrian army who Elisha heals from leprosy. It is also reflected in the stories of Jesus healing his Gentile enemies. God's peace is a universal peace that is being proclaimed and announced in the song of the angels.

The episode of the shepherds is introduced by the shepherd's words. I think it's guy language: "Hey, come on you guys, let's go!" It is not proper English, nor pompous in any way. These are down-home guys saying to one another, "Come on, let's go!" They go with haste, hurrying to find Mary and Joseph and the baby lying in the manger. Notice that the article is different at this point. It isn't in "*a* manger," but rather "*the* manger." This is confirmation of what the shepherds heard from the angel. The spirit of their announcement is enthusiastic. It is indirect discourse, but the words need to communicate their energy and enthusiasm.

The last episode is a series of responses. First, everyone who heard it was filled with wonder and marveled at what the shepherds had told them. Next we are told about Mary's internal response which gives the listener an emotional connection with her. Mary "kept these words" and that's what it is, not these "things," but rather, "these words."

And what words did Mary keep? The words from the shepherds about whom her baby boy is to be. The literal meaning of the Greek here is that she treasured these words in her memory and kept them in her heart, which is the location of memory. She rolled them around pondering them, rolling them around in her memory, thinking about what it is that God had done. The third response is of the shepherds. They returned, and this is again guy language with guy spirit: "They returned glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as it had been told to them!" It has that country down-home feel.

This story is full of highly charged emotional moments and is one of the great stories to tell. I hope that telling it is joyful for you. I hope that all those to whom you tell it will experience God's promise of peace.