

“Christmas at Luke’s House”

Series: *Christmas at the Gospel Writers’ Homes*

Rev. Mary Henderson Bowman

Date: December 22, 2024



While I am still not convinced that Luke would have decorated his house for Christmas, it is certainly easy to imagine a nativity scene in Luke’s front yard. It would be a nativity scene with all of the characters from his Gospel and the Gospel of Matthew that we have come to love . . . the sheep and the shepherds, the camels and the wiseman, and of course, Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus.

It is easy for us to come back to this story year after year and look at the nativity scene and think about the story.

But I don’t think Luke wants us to just think about the story.

I think Luke is inviting along on the story.

He gives us a cue in the way he describes Mary’s approach to all that was happening around her.

Luke tells us that Mary pondered all of these things in her heart. She seemed to have a natural way of going deeper with what was in front of her. She seemed to want to take the most meaning and understanding from what was happening around her.

I think Luke is inviting us to do the same.

There is an irony, of course, about the nativity scene.

We position all the characters and they then just stand there in one place.

The irony is that none of these characters stayed still in the story.

Have you ever noticed that there is a LOT of movement in Luke’s Gospel?

There is a LOT of journeying in Luke’s telling of the nativity story.

Zachariah journeys to the Temple . . . angels journey to Zachariah and then Mary and then finally the shepherds . . . and then Mary travels to her cousins’ Elizabeth and Zachariah . . . then Joseph and Mary spend a week journeying to Bethlehem . . . after the angel comes, the shepherds go and find Jesus . . . the wisemen follow a star a long way . . . Herod’s soldiers go to Bethlehem to murder the child which in turn forces Mary and Joseph and Jesus to sojourn in Egypt for a time . . . until . . . they travel back to Nazareth.

They have come full circle and yet they are not the same.

The characters in this story do not stay still physically — and most do not stay still spiritually. As one writer put it — “No one involved in the story of the Incarnation is left in the same place that they started from.”¹ They do not stay in the same physical places and they do not stay in the same spiritual space either.

We notice that none of the journeys are easy.

No limousine or air travel. No hiking boots. No nice hotels.

As God’s plan unfolds, the people in that plan are a part of something that is not easy. They likely have questions about what God is doing.

Why God is doing it this way?

Why couldn’t God make it easier?

Why can’t we have a road map with all of the details?

How can we be sure we are following God’s will?

From our vantage-point, we can’t help but see the ways that God is with them and opening them to new things.

We can’t help but see the ways they are being transformed and growing in faith.

But what about us? Don’t we have similar questions?

Don’t we wonder why things are hard?

Don’t we wonder why God is choosing to do things a certain way?

¹ Sacred Spaces by the Irish Jesuits from December 19, 2024.

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Don’t we wonder why the Herod’s of the world get to wield power?

Do we wonder if we are following God’s will?

From their vantage-point, I wonder what Mary and Joseph would tell us about what they learned as they journeyed and lived with God.

Luke uses just one sentence to describe the 90 mile, week long trip that Mary and Joseph made on foot and by donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Luke doesn’t get into the detail of the weather, the places they slept (likely out in the open), where they got food, who they talked with, the dangers they faced, whether the soldiers stopped them when they went through Jerusalem, how they dealt with their worry that Mary would give birth along the way. We have to use our own imaginations to fill in the details. It is up to us to ponder the harsher parts of the story amidst the promises of God.

And what of the shepherds who are living in the fields watching their flocks by night?

It is not an easy business to care for sheep at night.

It is not easy to be a shepherd. It is a 24/7 occupation. You have to be equal parts protector, guide, and provider.

I have no doubt that those shepherds had seen a lot of different things on their night watches, but it is wonderful to imagine what it was like when the angel came to them with the news that they and their people had been longing for.

A bit frightening? No doubt! And yet also stunning — because they got to witness the sheer joy of the heavens at Jesus’ birth.

And it must have been motivating because the shepherds took the invitation seriously and went on a journey of their own.

What must it have been like to know that the One who had been promised was finally here?

What must it have been like to find Mary and Joseph and the child of the promise?

What must it have been like to look into the face of God?

Would they have wanted to hold Him?

Would we want to hold Him?

Would they have spoken to Him?

Would we want to speak to Him?

Could they have described what He looked like?

Would we be able to describe what He looked like?

Would we be able to take in the remarkable gift of the child?

You see, the best possible gift from God . . . is God.²

Jesus is God — even as a vulnerable baby.

God has given and is giving the best possible gift to humanity.

Are we ready to really look into the face of God and to receive this gift?

The knowledge that Christ is with us and in us and for us.

May it be so. Amen.

² Ann Voscamp, *The Greatest Gift* as quoted by Katherine Mansfield