

Christmas Eve and Day, 2013  
Luke 2:1-20  
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December 24 & 25, 2013

This is a glorious time of year. Even those who celebrate a purely secular Christmas make the season more special with their decorations, especially the outside light displays. Some are more tasteful than others, but they all remind us religious that a new light has come into the world. With Jesus in it, the world has more color, more spirit, more panache and more brilliance.

December 25<sup>th</sup> was not chosen at random for the day to celebrate Christ's birth. The winter solstice, on December 21<sup>st</sup>, as you know, is the shortest day or longest night of the year. With the birth of Christ, the days begin getting longer, more and more light each day now. The darkness recedes with Jesus' arrival.

St. Luke's version of that night is some of the best and most purposeful storytelling ever composed. With poetic narrative, we are invited to walk with the young couple in a far corner of the mighty Roman Empire, where their lives are so seemingly insignificant. The mighty, all-powerful Emperor Augustus lives in the lap of luxury while Mary and Joseph can't find a room to give birth to their first child after a long journey from Nazareth. The authorities don't care what sort of hardship the census may have caused ordinary people. They just want more taxes for larger armies and more palatial living quarters. An animal stable and common feeding trough would have to make due as Mary gives birth in the least sanitary surroundings. Later in Luke, an adult Jesus would remind would-be followers that "the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

As that miracle birth is taking place, Luke transports the reader immediately out of Bethlehem and into the wilds of the barren, starlit scrub lands. One can barely make out the gray blobs of napping sheep dotting the landscape, but their overseers are standing erect and vigilant listening and watching for anyone or thing that may want to snatch a lamb or two. We might even say these lowly shepherds are the first Advent Men, on full alert for any slight disturbance to the quiet solitude.

If shepherds were at one time held in highest honor – considering that David, their greatest king, was once a brave shepherd boy – this was no longer the case. They were unkempt and unable to attend even the most basic religious observances because the sheep required constant attention. They had to have felt like the dregs of society having only themselves and their sheep to keep them company and comfort them. The nights were long and lonely.

While the rest of the people slept, they were awake when the angel of the Lord stood before them. Bandits or wolves, shooting stars or comets, they were prepared for, but an angel and the glory that accompanied him was well beyond their pay grade. Not surprisingly, we're told, they were terrified.

With the angel's assurance, they quickly realize that of all people they have been chosen to hear the most wondrous news. Is it because they are the only ones with their eyes open at this time of night or because they are the least deserving according to their society? If indeed this is God's messiah, the good

news is for everyone and for the poor and rejected most of all. It was Mary just a short while ago who exclaimed upon hearing she would be the holy mother,

*..he (God) has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts, he has put down the mighty from their thrones, and has exalted those of low degree; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent empty away. (Luke 1:51-53)*

And hundreds of years earlier, the prophet Isaiah spoke words that Israel would later attribute to the one who was to come, *The Spirit of the lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. (Isaiah 61:1)*

For those who have the least wealth, slightest future prospects, minimal resources, scarcest means of sustenance and diminished hope, the news of Jesus' birth is most important and most joyfully received. That is exactly why the shepherds appear to abandon their flocks and sprint to see this baby in a manger.

Can we be as excited tonight/today, this time around, as we recall and celebrate our savior's birth? Do we have unfulfilled longings, empty places, nagging fears and pockets of pain that human efforts cannot overcome? Are we too proud or sophisticated to believe that God has come from heaven to earth for you and me?

After all, it is quite a story! Incredible – The King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Son of God, born in relative obscurity, to poor peasant parents, with shepherds for godparents.

Tertullian, an early church father, said it best, "Nobody could make this stuff up. Therefore, I believe."

Tonight/Today we are asked to believe again. "For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven: by the power of the Holy Spirit he became incarnate from the Virgin Mary, and was made man." We recall the meaning of Christmas every time we recite the creeds.

If it is true, that God became one of us to show us how much we mean to the Almighty and to save us from the limitations and temptations of the flesh, then let us ask Jesus to fill our emptiness, drive away our fear, relieve our pain and empower us for service to our fellow sufferers.

Tyler Sexton was born 12 weeks early and had 16 surgeries as a child. His diagnosis of cerebral palsy affected his legs and lower body. He is now 28 and back in a pediatric unit as a doctor. While he still struggles to walk, his disability helps him bond with his patients. Sexton said, "When I walk in a child's room, I can say, 'I know what's going on with you,' and I can instantly help them move past perceived barriers in their lives."

Jesus, even more so, knows what's going on with us because he has lived in a human body and experienced a difficult and challenging human life. We must not wait to turn to him and let him save us and make us whole. AMEN.

