



Catalog No. 1911

Luke 2:1-20

11th Message

Bernard Bell

December 16, 2012

LAID IN A MANGER

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Today is the third Sunday of Advent. The theme long associated with this day is Joy. Hence it is called Gaudete Sunday, *gaudete* being the Latin imperative “Rejoice!” as in the old Latin hymn, *Gaudete, gaudete, Christus est natus!* “Rejoice, rejoice, Christ is born!” Today’s candle on our advent wreath is a different color: pink instead of purple, representing this call to rejoice. We have heeded this call in our songs this morning. But it is hard to rejoice today for our hearts are heavy after Friday’s mass shooting. Instead of “Joy to the World” it was Henry Longfellow’s carol that came to my mind on Friday:

I heard the bells on Christmas day
Their old familiar carols play
And wild and sweet the words repeat
Of peace on earth, good will to men.

And in despair I bowed my head:
“There is no peace on earth,” I said,
“For hate is strong, and mocks the song
Of peace on earth, good will to men.”

The shooting in Newtown, Connecticut, has mocked the Christmas celebrations, robbing the residents of peace and joy. They have now been taking down their Christmas decorations. What can we say into such a situation?

The preaching calendar was drawn up months ago, but I find it appropriate that on this day, which the church calendar long ago designated as a day for rejoicing but which today falls on a weekend of national grief, our topic should be Luke’s account of the birth of Jesus. It is a familiar text which many of us have known since childhood, but it is good to take another look at what the angel proclaims to be “good news.”

I. The Nativity (2:1-7)

I.1 Journey to Bethlehem (2:1-5)

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. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. 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, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. (Luke 2:1-5 ESV)

Luke begins his account of Jesus’ birth by anchoring it in history. The man we know as Caesar Augustus was born Octavian. He was Julius Caesar’s great nephew, but was subsequently adopted as his son and heir. In 31 BC Octavian defeated Marc Anthony to become sole leader of Rome, thus ending a civil war, the second such to ravage the Roman world in just thirty years. Rome was profoundly grateful for this peace and for the one who brought it, heaping honors upon Octavian. In 29 the doors of the shrine of Janus in the Roman forum, which stood open in time of war, were finally closed. In

27 the Senate gave Octavian the title Augustus, one worthy of worship, a title hitherto used for the gods but never before of a human. The Roman Empire was born with Octavian, now Caesar Augustus, as its emperor and chief citizen; he would rule the world for forty years. The Senate built an altar to *pax Augusta*, the Augustan peace. Imperial propaganda enhanced the mythology of Augustus. For example, an inscription found in Priene, just south of Ephesus, shows that the Greek cities of Asia Minor resolved to make the birthday of Augustus their new year’s day:

Since providence, which has ordered all things and is deeply interested in our life, has set in most perfect order by giving us Augustus, whom she filled with virtue that he might benefit humankind, sending him as a savior, both for us and for our descendants, that he might end war and arrange all things, ...and since the birthday of the god Augustus was the beginning of the good tidings for the world that came by reason of him...¹

Augustus was proclaimed as the savior, the bringer of peace; his birthday was the beginning of the good news, the gospel. Augustus had yet other titles. Since the deceased Julius Caesar had been declared a god, Augustus styled himself as the “son of a god.” He was proclaimed *kurios*, “lord.” The Roman Empire, and hence the world, revolved around him. He was the bridge between heaven and earth. He was the one whom the gods had given to restore the world.

But not all in the Roman Empire enjoyed *pax Romana*, the Roman peace. A century later the Roman historian Tacitus recorded the thoughts of the British chieftain Calgacus about Roman peace: “To ravage, to slaughter, to usurp under false titles, they call empire; and where they make a desert, they call it peace.”² Many in Judea would have shared that perspective, viewing Rome as the problem not the solution, and Augustus with his grand titles as a blasphemy.

To run his vast empire Augustus needed taxes, so he issued a decree that the whole world, the whole Roman Empire, be registered. So Joseph and Mary journeyed from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the ancestral town of Joseph, because he was of the house and lineage of David. Scholars wish that Luke had told us more about this census and the registration process; there are many details that are unclear and hence subject to scholarly debate. But Luke isn’t interested in the census as such. These verses aren’t about Roman tax policy. Luke deconstructs Augustus’ power. Augustus was *princeps*, the first citizen. He had the authority to issue a decree impacting everyone in his empire. But in Luke’s eyes this decree serves a much more important purpose of which Augustus was completely ignorant: to get Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The census was incidental; getting Mary and the child in her womb to Bethlehem was what mattered. Behind Augustus’s great power a far greater ruler was at work putting his plan into effect. In God’s plan it was necessary to get Mary to Bethlehem so that her son be born in the city of David—not in Jerusalem, but in the little village of Bethlehem.

1.2 The Birth (2:6-7)

And 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 cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. (2:6-7)

Luke narrates the actual birth with great economy. He tells us none of the things we want to know, none of the information which appears on any baby announcement today: the baby's length and weight. He doesn't tell us the date or time. He doesn't tell us where specifically the baby was born, though he does imply where he was not born: "in the inn." Nature abhors a vacuum, and so do enquiring minds. Such minds quickly got to work and used their imaginations to fill in many of the gaps. Over the next few centuries, after the four gospels had been written, several infancy narratives were composed, usually pseudonymously in the name of someone from Jesus' circle, a family member or disciple. Many of our cherished images of the nativity derive not from Scripture but from these stories, which are fanciful with little factual basis.

When was Jesus born? Neither Luke nor Matthew tells us. For the first few centuries the date of his birth moved all over the calendar, but by the mid-fourth century the church in Rome had settled on the spring equinox for his conception and the winter solstice for his birth, these events falling on the 25th day of the month in the Roman calendar. It was actually the date of the conception (and of the annunciation) that was nailed down first.

Where was Jesus born? In the second century it was already well-established that Mary gave birth in a cave. The *Infancy Gospel of James* (c. 150) reports that Mary, mounted on a donkey as they traveled from Nazareth, went into labor three miles before they reached Bethlehem. Joseph found a cave where he left her and went into town in search of a midwife. When Constantine's mother Helena made her tour of the Holy Land in 326 she was shown the cave, over which the first basilica was soon built. The current Church of the Nativity, located in Manger Square, was built in 565 by Justinian. Here one can see the cave, where a star marks the spot where Jesus was born. The later infancy gospel of Matthew further elaborated: three days after the birth Joseph moved the baby to a stable, placing him in a stall between the ox and ass. But was Jesus born in a cave or a stable?

Luke tells us why the baby Jesus was laid in a manger: in the version in which most of us know the story, "because there was no room for them in the inn" (KJV, NASB). Together with the traditions derived from the infancy gospels the picture we have in our mind is that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem late at night to find that the motel was full; the only place they could find in their haste was not intended for human accommodation, whether cave or stable. In this forlorn place Mary gave birth that very night, alone except for Joseph and some animals. This view is reflected in a popular carol:

Now Joseph and his wife Mary
came to Bethlehem that night,
they found no place to bear her child,
not a single room was in sight.

By and by they found a little nook
in a stable all forlorn,
and in a manger, cold and dark,
Mary's little boy-child was born.

But is this right? The popular image is wrong on many counts. Mary and Joseph had been in Bethlehem for some time; we don't know whether it was days or weeks, but it wasn't hours or minutes. It was "while they were there, the time came for her to give birth." Secondly, since Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral town it would have been unthinkable that he not be given hospitality. Even more so for Mary, a woman about to bear her firstborn.

What Luke actually says is that there was no place (*topos*) for them in the *kataluma*. So what is a *kataluma*? The only other use of this word in the New Testament is for the room where Jesus ate his last supper with his disciples. Jesus sent Peter and John ahead of him into Jerusalem, saying:

"Behold, when you have entered the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him into the house that he enters and tell the master of the house, 'The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room (*kataluma*), where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' And he will show you a large upper room furnished; prepare it there." (Luke 22:11; cf. Mark 14:14)

Luke does write about an inn: the parable of the Good Samaritan features both an inn and an inn-keeper (10:34-45), but Luke uses a different word for the inn.

Ken Bailey explains the situation, based on his experience of living in the Middle East most of his life.³ A standard peasant house had two rooms: a main room in which the family cooked, ate and slept, and a guest room, either at the end of the house or on the roof. On this occasion the guest room, the *kataluma*, was already full, so Joseph and Mary had to stay in the main room with the family. One end of the room was a couple of feet lower; into this section the animals were brought at night: perhaps a donkey and a few sheep or goats. At the end of the upper portion of the room were their feeding troughs, at the animals' head level for convenient access. The baby Jesus was born in the main living room, surrounded by loving people. Where to lay the newborn baby? The manger served perfectly as a crib.

But none of this does Luke tell us. It is widely assumed that Luke got his information from Mary herself. A mother remembers many details about the birth of her firstborn, but Luke tells us only two things: Mary wrapped her baby in cloths and she laid him in a manger. Luke tells us these details repeatedly. The angels give a sign to the shepherds: "you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger" (2:12); when the shepherds came to Bethlehem they "found...the baby lying in a manger" (2:16) Why are these the only two details that Luke tells us? Why this repeated reference to the baby swaddled and lying in a manger? This striking image invites reflection, and Christians have been reflecting on it for a long time.

Swaddling cloths are back in style, meaning that the word "swaddling," once a dying relic from KJV, has a new lease of life. There was nothing unusual about a mother wrapping her baby in swaddling cloths. To have not done so would have indicated neglect. But it does seem unusual for Luke to draw attention to this, not once but twice. Luke doesn't tell us why, but his readers have pondered why. Is it because Luke knows that at the end of his life Jesus' body will be wrapped in a cloth and laid in a tomb (23:53)? Is Luke subtly indicating the trajectory of Jesus' life: that he who began his life wrapped in swaddling cloths and laid in a manger will end his life wrapped in a linen cloth and laid in a tomb, that this newborn babe is destined for death? Artists drew the connection: some paintings of the nativity depict the manger as a sepulcher. Some of the church fathers also

drew the parallel between the nativity at one end and the death and resurrection at the other.

Even more significant for Luke is the laying of the baby in a manger, for he mentions it three times. Does this simply confirm the opinion that Jesus was born in a stable? A manger is an animal's feeding trough, an unusual place to lay a baby. The church fathers were quick to draw a connection to the prophet Isaiah, which opens with the Lord's indictment against his people Judah for rejecting him:

**The ox knows its owner,
and the donkey its master's crib,
but Israel does not know,
my people do not understand. (Isa 1:3)**

They were quick to imagine the ox and ass looking into their feeding trough, recognizing the newborn babe as their lord and master, and so adoring him. For many centuries the ox and ass were thus depicted in religious art. They are the first to recognize and adore their lord. The time of rebellion is over. God's people will once again know him, and the way is led by the humble ox and the humble ass.

The ox and ass also make their appearance in Christmas music. For example, the Latin song, *O magnum mysterium, et admirabile sacramentum*, "O great mystery, and wonderful sacrament." What is this wonderful mystery? "That animals should see the new-born Lord, lying in a manger!" Or the 14th-century Latin hymn, *Puer nobis nascitur*, translated into English as "Unto us a boy is born":

Lo! he lies within a stall
where cattle fed before him;
King of heaven and Lord of all,
they know him and adore him.

Today we sang "Good Christian men, rejoice!":

Ox and ass before him bow,
and he is in the manger now.

But not all carols get it right; for example, the Polish carol:

Infant holy, infant lowly,
for his bed a cattle stall;
oxen lowing, little knowing
Christ the babe is Lord of all.

But the ox and ass do know! They are the first to know!

2. The Shepherds (2:8-20)

Luke has been very economical in describing the birth of Jesus. His focus is on what happens next: the appearance of the angel to the shepherds and their visit to see Jesus.

2.1 The Annunciation (2:8-14)

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. 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. 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. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And 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,
and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!"
(2:8-14)**

In the open countryside beyond Bethlehem were some shepherds, keeping the night watches over their sheep. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, not hovering in the air as usually depicted, but standing in front of them, just as Gabriel stood in front of Zechariah (1:11) and in front of Mary (1:28). The night sky was lit up by the glory of the Lord: the Lord's awesome presence which had accompanied Israel in the wilderness and filled the tabernacle and temple. The Lord's shekinah glory, which had been absent from Israel for many centuries, had returned. It didn't fill the temple in Jerusalem; instead it came to shepherds out in the fields. The appearance of the angel had its usual effect: "they were sore afraid" (KJV; lit. "they feared a great fear"), just as Zechariah (1:12) and Mary (1:29) had been before them. The angel gave the same response, "Fear not!" and then announced the good news:

"I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."

The angel Gabriel had been sent to Zechariah to bring him good news (1:19). This angel has even greater news to proclaim. As we sang, "News! news! Jesus Christ is born today!" This news is the evangel, the gospel. It begins with the birth of Jesus, born today in the city of David. The long-awaited day has arrived Today! "Today" is a favorite word of Luke's, part of his realized eschatology: the things longed for at the end of the tunnel are happening Today! The angel proclaims the significance of this newborn babe: he is Savior, Christ and Lord, a stunning juxtaposition of exalted titles. He is Christ, the Messiah for whom Israel longed. He, not Augustus, is both Savior and Lord. It is the birth of this baby that is good news which brings joy. It is the birthday of Jesus that will define the calendar, not the birthday of Augustus. Lord (*kurios*) is used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to translate God's name, Yahweh. Luke has hitherto used it frequently to refer to God. But now he unambiguously applies this title to Jesus, even this babe but a few hours old. Far more than any other gospel writer he will refer to Jesus as Lord. Jesus is the Savior, another favorite theme of Luke's. Throughout his gospel Luke shows Jesus bringing salvation, not to the high and mighty, but to the poor, the weak, the needy, to those who cry out, "Lord, have mercy!" Thereby he brings peace, not peace imposed by military might, but peace achieved through forgiveness of sins and reconciliation to God and one's neighbor.

This proclamation of Jesus' birth and of its significance comes not to Augustus in Rome, nor to the governor in Antioch, capital of Syria, nor to Herod the Great in one of his many palaces, nor to the Jewish leaders in the temple in Jerusalem. It comes to humble shepherds out in the fields. The popular mythology of Christmas has given us a romantic view of these shepherds that has little basis in reality. These shepherds were rough and tumble, humble folk. They were from the lowest strata of society. To these shepherds the angel gave a sign: "you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Again, it would not be unusual to find a swaddled baby; the unusual element is that he be lying in a manger.

The angel was immediately joined by a heavenly army, armed not with military weapons but with their tongues. They burst out in praise, another favorite theme of Luke's whose infancy narrative is full of praise, praise that spreads throughout the gospel.

**"Glory to God in the highest,
and on earth peace among people of good favor."**

KJV mistranslates this as “on earth peace, good will toward men.” No, the proclamation is of peace on earth to people of good favor, that is, to people who are the objects of God’s good favor. How has he shown his good favor? By causing a baby to be born. By humbling himself to the point of sending his Son into the world to be laid as a swaddled baby in an animal’s feeding trough.

The birth of this baby in Bethlehem calls for glory or praise in the highest heaven, *in excelsis*. Praise from the heavenly choir of angels. Praise from those on earth whom God has embraced in his good favor. Praise from the church through the ages which has incorporated this heavenly song into its liturgy as the Gloria.

2.2 The Adoration of the Shepherds (2:15-20)

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.” And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (2:15-20)

Unlike Zechariah and Mary, the shepherds offered no objection to the angel’s announcement. Instead they urged one another on: “let us go...let us see.” They immediately hurried into town and found it just as the angel said. They found the holy family: Mary, Joseph and the baby lying in a manger.

When they had seen what the angel told them they would see, they spoke up. What had been made known to them they in turn made known to others. They told everyone who was there what the angel had told them: that this baby was the Savior, Christ the Lord; that this was the good news; that this was great joy for all people.

All who heard the shepherds responded in wonder, another Lucan theme. But Mary went further: she “treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart.” Earlier she had pondered Gabriel’s greeting (1:29). Now she adds into her memory what the shepherds said about her newborn. Later she will marvel at what Simeon said about him (2:33), and, later still, be astonished when she found her son, now aged twelve, in the temple (2:48). Mary “treasured up all these things in her heart” (2:51). Mary emerges from these two chapters as the deep thinker, as the one who spends her life pondering her son and the things said about him.

And so the good news began to spread. The angel told the shepherds. The shepherds told all those present. By the end of Luke’s second volume the good news had reached Rome, where it would penetrate even into Caesar’s household. Paul’s visit to Thessalonica with Silas on his second journey provoked a riot by the Jews, who complained to the city authorities:

“These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also, and Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus.” (Acts 17:6-7)

This was the good news in the days of Caesar. There is another king: Jesus, who counters the decrees of Caesar. This good news turned the world upside down, or rather, turns it the right side up. This is the news for a world that grieves.

We long to recreate the scene of Bethlehem. Several churches in our area are currently running large-scale recreations: in Santa Clara, in Redwood City, and now in Livermore. The first person to recreate the scene was St Francis of Assisi, who had visited Bethlehem. In 1223 in the village of Greccio, he set up a live nativity scene with a crib and live animals. Thereafter, model nativity scenes or crèches became popular and remain so. Many of us have them in our homes; some people collect dozens of them. This one here is of olive wood and was brought back from Bethlehem.

Here are the ox and the ass from Isaiah. They see the baby lying in their manger; they recognize him as their Lord, and so they adore him. Here are the shepherds from Luke’s gospel, representing the Jews. They have responded to the good news announced by the angel; they have found the baby lying in a manger and they, too, adore him. Here are the magi from Matthew’s gospel, representing the Gentiles. They have followed the star to Bethlehem, where they have fallen down and they worship. Let us join them at the manger. The most important piece in this crèche is the smallest one: the swaddled baby lying in a manger. This is the good news that brings great joy. This is the Savior, Christ the Lord. This is the one who brings peace on earth among those with whom God is pleased. *Gloria in excelsis deo*; glory to God in the highest. O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord!

Above the clamor of our violence
your Word of truth resounds,
O God of majesty and power.
Over nations enshrouded in despair
your justice dawns.
Grant your household
a discerning spirit and a watchful eye
to perceive the hour in which we live.
Hasten the advent of that Day
when the weapons of war shall be banished,
our deeds of darkness cast off,
and all your scattered children gathered into one.
We ask this through him whose coming is certain,
whose Day draws near:
your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever.⁴

1. Craig A. Evans, “Mark’s Incipit and the Priene Calendar Inscription: From Jewish Gospel to Greco-Roman Gospel,” *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism* 1 (2000), 69.

2. Tacitus, *Agricola* 30.

3. Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2008), 25-37.

4. This prayer, written for the first Sunday of Advent, is available in multiple sources, including *An Advent Sourcebook* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1988), 40.