



by Joan Mitchell, CSJ

Open a bible to Luke 2.1-20. Light a candle beside the gospel of Jesus' birth. Light the Christmas tree if there is one where you gather. Then pray:

LEADER: Loving Creator, your eternal Word leaped down from heaven in the silent watches of the night.

ALL: We, your Church, are filled with wonder at the nearness of our God.

LEADER: Today a child is born to us.

ALL: Today, you give your Son for us.

Christians celebrate Christmas just after the winter solstice in the northern hemisphere. In nature, daylight imperceptibly lengthens. In the first reading a great light dawns on a people in darkness. In the gospel a life begins that changes the world.

Dawn is the birth time of day. Faint light sets the eastern horizon aglow and streaks clouds with rosy tints. Dawn is the moment birds begin to sing, waking cats

from their dreams. This is the hour of Jesus' resurrection from the darkness of the tomb—the hour of God's new creation.

Birth pushes a baby out of the dark security of a mother's womb into the shared and challenging world of other people. Birth is a journey from silence to voice. We count our lifetimes from this moment. Christmas celebrates the significance of Jesus' whole life in his birth.

In Luke's account the world sleeps at the time of Jesus' birth except the shepherds who are awake watching their flocks

in the fields. Angels bring to them the good news from heaven for earth—a savior is born.

This newborn child embodies new promise and purpose for the human race. In him, God becomes human that we humans might become divine. This child whose first resting place is a lowly manger among animals will reveal the One no one had ever seen before. In Jesus, we will see the glory of God. We count our years on earth from his birth.

● Describe a family Christmas tradition important to you.

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SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

GOSPEL

Today a savior is born to you.

NARRATOR 1: In those days Caesar Augustus published a decree ordering a census of the whole world. This first census took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to register, each in his own town. And so Joseph, too, went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, for he was of the house and lineage of David, to register with Mary, his espoused wife, who was pregnant.

NARRATOR 2: It happened while they were there that the days of her pregnancy were completed. She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger,

because there was no room for them in the inn.

NARRATOR 3: There were shepherds in the same area, living in the fields and keeping night watch over their flock. An angel of the Lord came suddenly upon them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were very much afraid.

ANGEL: You have nothing to fear! I bring you good news, a great joy to be shared by the whole people. For this day in David's city a savior has been born to you, who is Christ the Lord. Let this be a sign to you: you will find an infant wrapped in swaddling clothes in a manger.



NARRATOR 1: Suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God.

ALL: Glory to God in high heaven; on earth peace to those on whom God's favor rests.

Luke 2.1-20

The Holy Family protects the child born for us.

Christmas celebrates the most ordinary of earthshaking events—the birth of a child. Just as ripples ring outward from a stone dropped in water, so the birth of every child affects parents, children, relatives, neighbors—all those around him or her.

The parents who hear the Christmas gospel—their own children perhaps still tugging at their knees—can fill in the family responsibilities Luke's account assumes. Mary and Joseph must feed and clothe their new baby, rock and bathe him, teach him to talk and

walk, play peek-a-boo, and keep him from danger. The gospel testifies that Jesus grew in wisdom and grace in his family.

Many people today may identify with how unusual Jesus' family is. His mother is not married when he is conceived. His mother's husband is not Jesus' real dad. His mother is still a virgin, perhaps still a teenager.

Mary and Joseph face all the challenges any child presents new parents, but Luke's story also tells us their baby is extraordinary—the savior, the messiah, God's Son. These titles make claims about who Jesus is

that eventually get him arrested and condemned to death.

Christmas celebrates Jesus' birth. Luke's gospel and the Christmas Liturgy of the Word fill the story of Jesus' birth with the significance of his whole redemptive life. The birth narrative is no realistic video in narrative form, but a story carefully crafted to communicate to every hearer the same tidings of great joy the shepherds hear. A savior has been born to us. The messiah that Israel has long awaited has come. God's own Son is with us. Each statement proclaims the whole gospel in summary.

● **What experiences of your children's birth do you bring to hearing the Christmas gospel?**

● **What makes you aware that Jesus' birth story reflects on his whole life story?**

● **To whom do you relate most easily—the Christ child or the crucified messiah?**

Angels are the ones who know who Jesus is in Luke's gospel. They come from the heavens to announce his identity to humble shepherds. Luke has the angels give the shepherds—and us—a sign. The sign is the baby, lying in a manger.

A manger is a feed trough, so Jesus' first crib hints that he will give his life to nourish ours. More directly to the point, a manger is a place of very low status, a place among animals at the margin of human society. Luke wants us hearers of his story to recognize with the shepherds that this child is good news for the poor. The Son of the Most High is joy to poor shepherds and safe with temporarily homeless parents.

Caesar, on the other hand, has an interest in the story in counting the potential taxpayers in his empire. Caesar's census brings so many descendants of David to Bethlehem to register that Jesus begins life in a world without room for him or his parents.

Luke wants us to contrast the child and Caesar. People hail both as saviors. However, it is the child lying in the manger who incarnates the love and life-giving power of the universe, not the emperor, even though his subjects give him the title *Augustus—the divine*.

● **Where might Jesus be born today to express God's willingness to identify with the lowliest among us?**

● **What power does Jesus the Christ exert in our world compared with the power of today's Caesars? What power in your life?**

In December the Heart of the Beast Puppet Theatre in Minneapolis performs the Las Posadas ritual in the streets. Their version portrays the Holy Family as immigrant and migrant people. My grandniece Maya, adopted from Guatemala, attended with her mom and me. Maya noticed the face beneath the mask of the woman playing Mary. "She's is brown like me," Maya said.

The crowd leaves the theatre to follow Mary and Joseph house to house as they seek shelter but find no room. A police car and barricades halt the journey at a bridge. Actors with bullhorns shout at us, "Go home." In the crowd we chant, "We come in peace."

The crowd swarms over the bridge. A church in the next block opens its door. The Holy Family finds shelter. Children in bird and animal puppet masks run up the aisle to visit and venerate the newborn child with Mary and Joseph in front of the altar.

Jesus is born among the poor in a shelter for animals. His first visitors are shepherds who live outdoors with their sheep. His first bed is a manger. Retelling Jesus' birth story challenges us to make more room in our world for people who are poor.

Homeless in the Christmas gospel, the Holy Family become refugees in the gospel for Sunday. The magi's search for the newborn king of the Jews upsets King Herod. When the magi leave Bethlehem, Joseph experiences at a deep dream

level the danger their visit has stirred up. An angel of God counsels him to flee to Egypt, "Get up, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is searching for the child to destroy him" (Matthew 2.13).



News of Herod's death wakens in Joseph a dream of resettling his family back in Israel. For Joseph the wall between the heavenly and the earthly is thin. He reads and heeds his dreams as he did when an angel counseled him to take Mary as his wife and claim her child as his own. He acts on the spiritual visions his dreams give him. The Holy Family returns and settles in Nazareth, a village in Galilee.

The savior of the world begins life among the poor and uprooted who dream and hope

● What dreams well up from your unconscious when you sleep?

● What future for you does the Spirit of God suggest in these dreams?



FIRST READING

Honoring parents is wise.

Sunday's Old Testament reading is from the wisdom writing of Sirach, a school teacher who wrote down what he taught some time before 180 B.C. He teaches respect for fathers and mothers as a parent's God-given right. As motivation, Sirach teaches that honoring parents honors God and caring for aging parents will make the child prosper.

Respect for parents

God honors a father above his children and confirms a mother's right over her children.

Those who honor their father atone for sins;
those who respect their mother are like those who lay up treasures.

Those who honor their father will have joy in their own children;
when they pray they will be heard.
Those who respect their father will have long life; those who honor their mother obey God.

My child, help your father in his old age, and do not grieve him as long as he lives; even if his mind fail, be patient with him; because you have all your faculties, do not despise him. Kindness to a father will not be forgotten, and will be credited to you against your sins.

Sirach 3.2-7,12-14

● What is your wisest advice for helping parents who are old?

PRAY

Pray for family needs, both families who struggle and needs that press upon your own family.

LEADER: Let us open our hearts to God's dream for us and our children.

ALL: Help us bear with one another.

LEADER: Sheltering God, help us shelter one another in our families.

Take turns making petitions for family needs. Respond to each petition—

ALL: Hold us in your love, sheltering God.

Exchange a sign of peace.



DO SOMETHING

CHARITY

JUSTICE

● Learn about and participate in work to create fair and comprehensive immigrant legislation at networklobby.org.

● Find and prayer the Novena for Migrant Families at the Jesuit Social Research Institute—loyno.edu/jsri/

● Learn about United States/Mexico border issues from firsthand accounts at annunciationhouse.org or Global Sisters Report: A Project of the National Catholic Reporter.

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