

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.

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December 25, 2023, Christmas, Vol. 32, No. 13

SUNDAY

by SUNDAY

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.

● Take turns describing the Christmas card, decoration, custom, carol, or family moment that has most touched you with what Christmas is about this year.

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

A child is 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 the significance of Jesus' whole life in his 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.

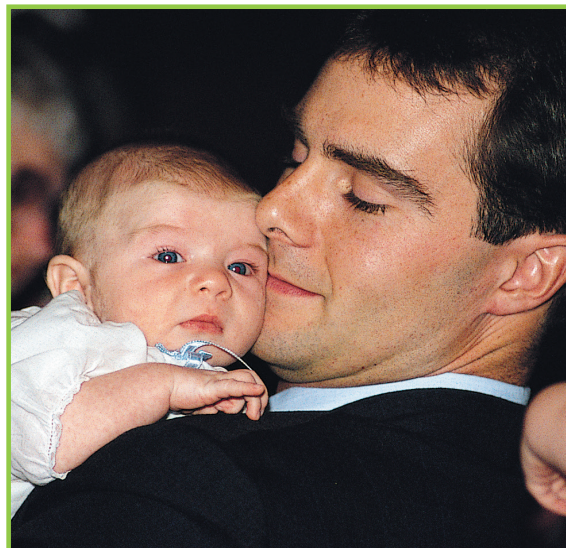
A manger is a feed trough, so Jesus' first crib hints that he will give his life to nourish ours. More directly to the point, a manger is a place of very low status, a place among animals at the margin of human society. Luke wants us hearers of his story to recognize with the shepherds that this child 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?**

The shepherds hurry to Bethlehem to check out the sign the angels give them. They tell Mary and Joseph the good news the angels told them. A savior has been born in Bethlehem who is Christ the Lord. The word *Christ* means *messiah*. When we say that Jesus is Lord, this means he is God.



According to the gospel, Mary treasures the shepherds' words and ponders them in her heart. Only the events that climax Jesus' life will fully reveal the significance of these titles—savior, Christ, Lord. Mary models faith as an ongoing process. She holds onto what she cannot yet interpret.

At the annunciation Mary commits herself to God's word. She puts her whole self at God's service. Her commitment gives her no foreknowledge; rather like all of us, she gets insight only over time as events unfold. The Word God conceives in her develops not only normally in the womb but also gradually in her life experience of raising her son and standing by him.

Mary proclaims in her *Magnificat* that God has raised up the lowly in calling her. Her prayer is prophetic. God will also raise up this son of hers who begins life in a manger and completes his life on the cross. Writing in A.D. 80, Luke knows Jesus' whole story. His infancy narratives testify that this child is the true savior of the world.

- **When you look back on Jesus' birth from our vantage point in the third millennium, what do you see as Jesus' significance?**
- **Who are the lowly who most concern you this Christmas? How can you or your Christian community help raise them up?**

FIRST READING

Isaiah promises a prince of peace.

The first reading for Christmas reaches back in time to remember the people of Galilee and the northern kingdom of Israel, who after the Assyrians defeated them in 721 B.C. were a people in darkness and their area a land of gloom. The Liturgy of the Word wants us to recognize in Jesus the new king Isaiah prophesied seven centuries earlier.

The light Isaiah long ago promised shines in Jesus. The king whose names Wonder-Counsel, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace promise a new era is born. Isaiah is the prophet of God's fidelity to Israel.



God is faithful.

The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom,
a light has shone.
You have brought them abundant joy and great rejoicing,
as they rejoice before you at the harvest or when dividing spoils.
For the yoke that burdened them,
the pole on their shoulder,
and the rod of their taskmaster
you have smashed as at Midian.
For every boot that trampled in battle and cloak rolled in blood
will be burned, fuel for flames.

For a child is born to us,
a son is given us; they name him
Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero,
Father-Forever, Prince of Peace.
His dominion is vast
and forever peaceful,
from David's throne,
and over his kingdom,
which he confirms and sustains
by judgment and justice
both now and forever.
The zeal of the Lord of hosts will do this.

Isaiah 9.1-6

- What passages in the Christmas scriptures help you see God's faithfulness in your life and in our world today?
- What scripture quotations on greetings cards best speak the meaning of Christmas to you?

GET OUT YOUR CALENDAR
and plan when to make
the online retreat on Jesus'
prayer, the Our Father, at
GoodGroundPress.com.

- What promise do you see in your children?
- What would you name the leader we need to have born into our world today?

PRAY

Pray to conclude your reflection on the Christmas scriptures. Whom do you wish to include in the new birth, light, and joy of the feast?

LEADER: God's kindness and love have appeared to save us.

ALL: A child is born to us.

LEADER: Not because we have done righteous deeds but because God is merciful.

ALL: A child is born to us.

LEADER: Let us hold the candle and name people each of us wishes to bless in a special way this season. Then we will pass the candle on.

Name people you wish to bless.

ALL: The Word who was from the beginning, who was with God, and was God has become flesh and dwells among us. God is with us. Amen.



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