

Today marks week three of Advent church family! Gaudete Sunday. Joy Sunday. And how fitting that this week we take a closer look at the Journey to Joy. That significant journey that take a very pregnant Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem. Our advent series is based on the Advent Study, Light of the World by Amy-Jill Levine.

Who hear thought maybe they missed something when they heard a passage of scripture typically reserved for Christmas eve? Thought maybe Pastor Amy missed something. Uh...Pastor Amy...did you think today was Christmas Eve?

This beloved passage from Luke is indeed one usually reserved for that most holy night. And don't you worry, you will get to hear it again on Christmas Eve. But I think I'm beginning to know you all pretty well. You are not ones to be satisfied with a simplified message of this passage. That one we will reserve for Christmas Eve. Today and today only, just for you, we are going to go deep into the meaning of the events told in the 2<sup>nd</sup> chapter of Luke's gospel. Are you ready? I'm ready, let's get started!

We've seen repeatedly throughout this series the significance of time, place, and names. For example, think about this contrast. John the Baptist. Born in Judea during the reign of King Herod. Conception, birth, and circumcision take place on a national stage in Jerusalem. His work will mostly be with fellow Jews. Jesus. His story starts in "Nazareth, a city in Galilee. His birth, in the context of a Roman census signals an empire-wide focus. Jesus' message is not just for the Jews but for "all the world".

In Luke, the story of Jesus starts with a decree from Caesar Augustus. The Greek word underlying "decree" is *dogma*. This ruling of Caesar is not to be ignored. To do so could mean war and death. Beginning the Jesus story with such a decree gives Luke license to tell a tale. To understand the meaning of this insertion, we need to look at the difference between our understanding of census today and what it meant in the first century. Today a census is a way to determine needs for political representation and social services. Back then, the census

determined the local tax base and also identified the number of men who could be drafted into military service.

Most census requests don't require a trip anywhere, it takes place in your own locale. So Luke provides us with more than just a census request. He provides us with symbolism and practicality. By taking place in Bethlehem, we get to see Joseph's Davidic connection. We also get a glimpse into a puzzle where Jesus of Nazareth is not actually born in Nazareth of Galilee. Luke stays true to the promise that the angel Gabriel made to Mary.

As we've mentioned, Matthew and Luke are the only ones who tell a birth story. And what they focus on tells a story too. Matthew tells us about how Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus move from Judea to Egypt to Galilee. Matthew wants his readers to see Jesus as the new Moses. Luke wants his readers to see the movement of Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem as a sign that followers of Jesus will also be on the move, being witnesses of Jesus from Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and even to the ends of the earth. (Psst....that how Luke will describe it in the book of Acts.”)

We have the census, we have the journey to Bethlehem. What comes next? We actually have a reporter live in Bethlehem this very moment. “Here's the scene in Bethlehem folks. It is evening, the sun is almost completely set. A peasant couple just came in to town and the wife is pregnant. Very pregnant. And she's riding on a donkey? Sheesh. Poor girl. They seem to be going around town and knocking on doors. One by one, we saw heads poking out of the door and then solemnly shaking their heads. The couple finds one door where first there is headshaking, followed by finger pointing. Could it be that this innkeeper had something for them? We see him leading the couple down the steps to the back of the house. Well, that's where the stable is. Surely not!” Back to you Pastor Amy.

Now I don't know about you, but I've had plenty of experience with this story. In my younger days, the part of the innkeeper would be portrayed as a nasty, greedy, hotel owner. The “you don't have enough money so scram type of innkeeper. Others have suggested that the innkeeper

was concerned with ritual purity and allowing Mary to have her baby at the inn would render the entire space useless for several days. Luke was one for details. Did the inn had a sign that said, no menstruating women, no women who've recently given birth, no one who in the last week attended a funeral. Not allowed! Or does this story have nothing to do with poverty and purity and everything to do with privacy.

Inns were public places back then. The stable would allow Mary the privacy she needed to have a baby. Plus think about how the stable contributes to Luke's objective with this birth story. Let's start with the word manger. In French this is a verb that means "to eat". This manger is not a bed of straw, it is a feeding trough. Think about the meaning of this as Mary places her baby in a manger or where food is found. One day in the future, this baby will take bread and say. "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. Jesus's placement in a manger, in a feeding trough is a foreshadowing of the Communion story.

The name Bethlehem contributes to this even further. The name Bethlehem literally means "house of bread." Listening to this birth story and the mention of Bethlehem should connect its listeners to other stories where Jesus shares a meal. Feeding the 5000. Eating with sinners and tax collectors like Jesus. Meals with the Pharisees. Dinner at Emmaus and the final meal of broiled fish.

The band of cloth has a biblical connection. But we need to look beyond our Christian canon to the Wisdom of Solomon. This is part of the apocrypha which is acknowledged by Catholics, Anglicans, and Orthodox churches. Wisdom 7:4-6 says this. "King Solomon is "nurtured by snug clothes and good care. No king has ever begun life any differently. There's only one way into life for everyone, and only one way out as well." Jesus is fully human and enters the world as other babies do. He will also die as other humans do.

While Mary is busy giving birth to the light of the world, we turn our attention to the great outdoors. Because shepherds are nearby guarding the sheep at night. It is to these shepherds that an angel will again appear. First it was Zechariah, then Mary, and now in the fields outside of

Bethlehem. Myth buster time. These shepherds are not ritually impure as some have said, and no Jesus is not just putting the kibosh on purity laws. (See what I did there with the insertion of Yiddish?) For all we know, these shepherds were guarding some of the very sheep that would be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem.

What then is the symbolic value of including shepherds? I'm glad you asked. (Yes I did hear you ask) The sheep are another example of a contrast to Caesar Augustus. The shepherds protect their sheep. They care for the vulnerable. Looking back through the Hebrew Canon, we remember other shepherds. People like Rebecca, wife of Isaac. There's Rachel, Jacob's second wife. And lets not forget the likes of Moses and David. Years later, Jesus would refer to himself as the good shepherd.

Now, back to the angel appearance, who starts with the same old song and dance, "Do not be afraid." And once again the angel adds something to the effect of, "Have I got good news for you!" Every gospel writer finds a different part in the story line to determine the beginning of the Good News. For Luke the good news begins with Jesus' birth. This is more than just a joyful announcement. Luke's readers would get the subtle reference to the declaration at the birth of Caesar Augustus. The one that declared him to be a "god". But the good news of Jesus doesn't come from earthly power. It comes from heaven above.

But let's not bypass important events and skip straight to the cross. We need to hear the good news of John the Baptist. We need to witness the birth of Jesus. We need to experience every aspect, every sense of the gospel as it plays out in the life of Jesus. Good news in Greek is Euangelion. It was frequently used in the Greco-Roman world. It was a secular word. Luke takes this secular word and turns it into the theological question of the day. What good news will this new king, this heir of David, this Son of God bring? The only way to find out is to continue reading Luke's gospel.

And what kind of savior would the newborn baby be? Will he be the Hebrew Scripture version of salvation? A salvation that saves people from war, hunger, disease, plague, and oppression.

Will he be the New Testament version of salvation? One that saves from sin and death. As far as Luke is concerned it is both. The focus on the desperate needs of people must remain. To hear and live this Gospel, this good news, is to allow salvation to offer respite from what ever oppresses in the community.

What will the shepherds receive as a sign? There will not be a supernova. There will not be an angel. Their signs will be this. Bands of cloth, the manger, and the baby. Supernatural signs just aren't all that significant to Luke where Jesus' birth is concerned. Look at Mary? Her proof of her angel encounter and prophecy was the human pregnancy of her cousin, Elizabeth. We don't need to search for the stars for signs, we will receive enough signs right in front of our eyes if we take the time to look. Stories of sowers and seeds, vines and fig trees, yeast and fish.

Next the shepherds are patrons of a concert. Not just any concert. It's from a celestial choir. The KJV calls this the heavenly host. Newer translations call it the heavenly forces, which interprets the language better. Forces. Armed forces. This is none other than God's army. This army is intimately involved in a relationship with God. This is how they can sing things like, "peace among those whom he favors". This choir is the peace-keeping force of the universe.

The shepherds know what they must do next. They must go to Bethlehem to see what has happened! And what do the shepherds see when they arrive at the stable? The bigger question is what didn't they see? It wasn't a baby that glows in the dark. It wasn't a baby who could speak intelligently, in fact this one didn't even have a complete set of teeth yet. All they see is a baby, are real baby, snuggled in his bands of cloth. There is nothing all that special in what they physically see. But, the specialness comes in how they interpret what they see.

You see, at this moment in time Jesus needed something more than angels in his life. He needed people. He needed human companionship. A humanity that shows compassion and is fully able to love neighbor as self. In this moment Luke is telling his readers and us that it's ok to pay attention to earthly matters. To neighbors, relatives, shepherds, heck anyone else at the inn who cared to be involved. Celestial armies will have their moment later.

The shepherds report to Mary and Joseph what the angel said about the baby. Can't you see Mary knowingly nodding? She knew what it was like to have a conversation with an angel and she never wanted to forget so she committed these things to memory.

For Mary, the shepherds become a sign. An assurance that yes, what you experienced was no hallucination. No matter how unbelievable everything has been. Mentioning Joseph, coincidence? I think not. Joseph also needs assurance. He needs confirmation that what Mary told him was true.

In Luke there is no Magi story. That is saved for Matthew. Because they both have different purposes in their birth stories. Luke wants to keep the eye on this message of the Gospel: lifting up the lowly. Matthew has other concerns: the response of the Gentiles to this Jewish king. Herod's response will clearly be different than that of the Magi.

At this point the shepherds leave and become the earliest evangelists of Jesus. They will tell everyone they know what they've seen and heard.

Church family, many of you have traveled this road every year of your life. Some of you may be experiencing this for the first time. Wherever you fit with the Christmas story, I pray that your reaction will be like that of the shepherds. Once they heard about and touched the gift of this journey of joy, they couldn't help but share it with anyone who would listen. Go tell it on the mountain friends. Jesus Christ is born.