

BORN IN A BARN

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Luke 2:1-12

My daughter's birthday is in late June. Shortly before she was born, in early April, when my wife was six months pregnant, I sent an email out to family and close friends. In this email, I explained how excited Courtney and I were about the upcoming birth of our child and we wanted to let everyone know of a decision we had made. After touring the hospital's delivery ward, we decided that we did not want our child born into such a cold, sterile environment. We preferred that she be born at home. To facilitate this we had secured the services of a midwife—a lovely Jamaican woman named Odette. Not only had we met this woman, but she had already blessed our home and exorcised all the demons and negative energy. We were guaranteed a safe birth.

This email went out and the responses I received fell into three categories. Those in the first group were entirely cool with the idea of a midwife. They thought it was rather progressive of us. The second group politely but firmly expressed their opinion that they thought we were making a mistake, that the child should be born properly in a hospital. The third group were the ones who said, "You realize this is from Sherard. He wrote this. And did you notice the date? He sent it to you on April 1st. This is his April Fools prank." And they were right. It was an April Fools prank (and a pretty good one, too).

To be clear, I fully support the idea of midwifery. It is an ancient and honorable practice. But that was not our style and we fully intended that our child be born at Baptist hospital. And she was, and everything went smoothly.

In most births, the parents have some level of control over the situation. The timing always presents a challenge. Babies do set their own schedules, but within a window of a couple of weeks. But we know this, and parents are still able to plan where they want the child to be born and who they want to be present. And barring any extraordinary circumstances, it usually works out.

However, as we see in our reading this morning, for Mary and Joseph, all control over the birth of their child Jesus was stripped away. The Roman emperor Caesar Augustus had issued a decree that everyone in the Empire must be registered in a census. A census is not just a tabulation of the population, it is a blunt political act rooted in power. For the people of Israel, a census meant that the occupying Empire is forcibly registering each resident. The purpose of a census was not limited to determining the population of a region, but also to assess and collect taxes, to conscript additional men for military service. For this census, each person was required to register in the town of their birth. For Joseph, this meant traveling

from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of approximately 70 miles. His betrothed—his fiancée—Mary, had to travel with him from Bethlehem even though she was pregnant. The Empire didn't care. While they are in Bethlehem, Mary's child decides that it is ready to be born. As Luke describes it so succinctly, *And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

So much has been written about that one sentence that we could paint the moon with all the ink.

First of all we are told *there was no place for them in the inn*. The word inn is not the best translation here. The word should be something like “guest room.” It is the same word used to describe the “upper room” where Jesus celebrates the Passover Meal with his disciples. Private homes would have this upper room—or a loft—that was separate from the family space on the first floor. Guests could stay here. At the time of a census, you can be sure that the people of Bethlehem were renting out sleeping space and squeezing in as many people as possible. To say there was no room may have meant there was no space for them to rent. Or, as some have suggested, it may have meant there was no room for privacy for the intimate moment of giving birth. The couple, therefore, is forced to relocate to the stable area of the house. The stable area may have been a shed attached to the house. Or it may have been within the house—a section of the living quarters. It may even have been a cave. When I was in Bethlehem, our guide pointed out that the area is littered with small caves. These caves are ideal places to keep animals. All you need was a fence around the mouth of the cave to create a paddock. We'll never know the details, but we do know that Mary gave birth to her first son in a stable and for a crib she used a the feed trough.

The gospel goes on to tell us about shepherds working in the fields outside Bethlehem guarding their flocks. To these shepherds, an angel appears and *the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified*. Despite our conception of angels as being glow-y creatures with halos and wings, this is not an image substantiated by scripture. Angels are simply messengers of God. For example, the angels that came to Abraham appeared to be like three travelers. We can assume this angel looked ordinary as well. However, it was accompanied by *the glory of the Lord* which shown around the shepherd's terrifying them. The angel said to the shepherds, *Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.*

This is what I find to be most intriguing about this passage, the word sign—the angel sending the shepherds into Bethlehem in search of a sign. *This will be a sign for you.* That word sign changes everything. No longer are the circumstances of this birth *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, but in it a divine plan emerges.

The question I want to tackle is this, why was Jesus born in a barn? Was that important? And the answer is yes.

Throughout the Old Testament we read prophesies of a messiah. For example in 2 Samuel God says, *I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever* (2 Samuel 7).

And in Micah we read, *But you, O Bethlehem... from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel* (Micah 5:2).

At the time of Mary and Joseph, the people of Israel also sought a savior, a messiah. They were looking for a warrior king, powerful and strong, a leader to vanquish all foes. God, however, clearly had a different messiah in mind. A warrior may bring salvation from the Romans, but it does not bring salvation with God. God's salvation does not demand an army. God salvation demands a change of heart—a change of priorities—from power to humility, from strength to love, from force to compassion. God's savior wouldn't come into the world wielding a sword and slaying armies. No. God comes to us as an infant—the very definition of vulnerable.

I have no doubt that if Mary had her druthers, she would have wanted the birth to take place under different conditions. I'm sure she would have preferred to have been at home in Nazareth with her support system of friends and family to help her through the birth of her first child. Maybe she had an aunt who was a gifted midwife, someone who loved her and would watch out for her. But she wasn't in Nazareth. She was in Bethlehem forced there by powers over which she had no control. And in Bethlehem, other than Joseph, there was no one to look out for her, to help her. And when she went into labor she was forced to give birth among animals. And when the child was born was family there to surround it with love? No, but some shepherd's did stop by talking crazy about an angel. There's nothing about this birth that even hints at the family having any power or control. The holy family are pawns sent from Nazareth to Bethlehem, from a house to a barn, from family to some crazed shepherds, from warm blankets to strips of cloth, from a crib to a manger. All of this is the sign, the sign of the savior, the Messiah, our Lord.

Why was Jesus born in a barn? It was a sign that God is not concerned with power as we understand it, that salvation is available to all people, not just to those at the top, the powerful and the wealthy, but even the very least of these. We are saved by an infant, not a warrior. Jesus, for the entirety of his life, would teach that we should love our neighbors, feed the hungry, help the helpless, show compassion for the needy.

As we stand at the beginning of a new year, let us commit ourselves in the coming year to be living signs of God's presence, not signs of power but signs of vulnerability, of humility, of grace. Amen.