

Angels and Shepherds

December 24, 2017 Christmas Eve

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Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Christmas is full of wonderful traditions. And we have some wonderful traditional understandings of the Christmas story. We all know the story. We know it almost by heart. We can recite parts of it along with Linus during *The Charlie Brown Christmas Special*. The problem with our knowing this story so well is that we've blended our tradition around the story with the actual story and so we are missing some wonderful details about it. So tonight, I'd like to go back to the text, and strip away some of the tradition to get at some beautiful richness in the actual story.

Kenneth Bailey was an American Biblical scholar who was raised by missionaries in the Middle East and then returned to the Middle East in adulthood to teach in seminaries—he had a deep understanding of Middle Eastern culture and of the Bible as well. I've heard him twice at conferences, read several of his books, and also studied some of his videos that he made to make his scholarly material accessible. He explains some of the inconsistencies between the text and our traditions, and has found that the text is consistent with Middle Eastern culture. A lot of what I will share with you tonight comes from Dr. Bailey. And there is much more to learn than what I can share with you tonight, some of which I've shared before.

The story starts out with some pretty detailed specifics about the census that is being taken – it's the first registration, it was ordered by Caesar Augustus, and it was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. Each family had to return to their town of origin, and for Joseph and Mary, that meant Bethlehem, the city of David, who was an ancestor of Joseph's. Middle Eastern culture is a welcoming, family-oriented culture. We know from a story at the end of this chapter in Luke that when Mary and Joseph went to Jerusalem for the holy days, they traveled in a caravan with many family members – so many that on that trip, they didn't realize Jesus wasn't with them until after a day or two. Do we really think that in that kind of family environment, Joseph would go to Bethlehem, his family home, and no one would welcome them? We have a tradition that they arrived at night and Mary gave birth that night, but that is not what the text says. The text says "While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child." They had been there for a little while. They were certainly staying with family. We know that if no one in Joseph's family had been able to welcome them, then Mary's cousin Elizabeth would, for she lived in the same area. We don't recognize that because the earlier reference to Elizabeth's home described it as "in the hill country"—and most of us don't know that this is the small area around Bethlehem.

So if Mary and Joseph were staying with family, why does the story say there was no room at the inn? And the answer is – it doesn't, in Greek. In Greek, it says *ketaluma* which meant guest room. There is another word for inn, *pandocheion*, and that is the word that means a commercial establishment with an innkeeper. In the story of the Good Samaritan, when the

Samaritan took the injured man to the inn, it was a *pandocheion*. The classic Middle Eastern home had a large single room, where the family lived – they cooked and ate their meals there, and they slept there. They also had an upper room that was a guest room, called a *ketaluma*. The main room was slightly raised, and at one end, on the ground level, was a room where the family cow and donkey would be brought in at night. On the main level, right by that area, there were feeding troughs, or mangers, dug into the floor, so the animals could stand on the ground level, and eat from a manger on the main level.

Apparently during this time when so many relatives had returned to Bethlehem for the registration, the guest room was taken, so the host family welcomed Joseph and Mary into the family living space. And the manger must have seemed to be the perfect safe spot to lay the newborn baby. The first time my husband Carl and I traveled with our firstborn, Jason, who was 3 months old, we didn't have a portacrib, so we took one of the dresser drawers out in the motel, put towels and baby blankets in the drawer, placed it on the floor, and had him sleep there. When you are traveling, you make do. Mary and Joseph "wrapped the baby in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, for there was no room in the guest room." Dr. Bailey says that people in Palestine still wrap the babies, and there are records in the Old Testament of people wrapping the babies in the same way hundreds of years before Jesus was born. This is how the ordinary people cared for their babies in that region.

"And there were in that same country shepherds living in the field and watching their flocks by night. And an angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone all around them. And they were terrified."

This is not the angel of pop culture. These are not the angels in the outfield who bring victory to a baseball game; this is not the comfortable and encouraging Della Reese in "Touched by an Angel" and it certainly isn't the ruffled and earnest angel Clarence trying to earn his wings in "It's a Wonderful Life." Our culture has a fascination with angels – and they are usually shown as gentle but firm, accessible and encouraging version of regular people. In that, they are nothing like angels in the Bible. "Don't be afraid," says the angel who visited Mary to tell her that she would bear the Son of God. She wouldn't need that greeting if it were Clarence or Della Reese who had come to visit. "Fear not," the angels say to the shepherds tonight. Clarence never had to say that to George Bailey (no relation to Dr. Bailey, our Biblical scholar).

"Do not be afraid," said the angel, "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 was indeed a sign to the shepherds, that they would be welcome at the bedside of the baby Messiah—for he had been born in a home, just as their babies were, and was in an ordinary family home, with mangers at one end of the living space.

And in the closing verses, now that we know what to look for, we see two more clues that confirm Dr. Bailey's explanation of this passage.

“So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”

Clue number one—and when I heard this from Dr. Bailey, I was so surprised that I hadn’t noticed it before. “...[A]ll who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them.” There were other people there! Of course there were – it was a crowded family gathering! Mary and Joseph weren’t alone – they were surrounded by people who loved them and were caring for them. And all of those people were amazed to hear the shepherds’ story.

And the other confirming clue? “The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.” If the shepherds had found the newborn Messiah in a barn, with no one caring for him, they would not be praising God, they would be rounding up people to tend to this little family. But Mary and Joseph were in the heart of their family, and the shepherds had no concerns, only gratitude.

The story of Christmas isn’t about people unlike us, it’s about people just like us, who were gathering with family, a little crowded with all the company, but sharing in the joys and wonder of the time together. Jesus was welcomed by the common people, the ordinary people, the people that we would have been in those days. And Jesus welcomes us, too. When we choose to follow Jesus, we are always at home in the heart of God. We are welcomed into the family of God, and welcomed into the mission of God. Each of us ordinary people is called into the extraordinary mission of sharing God’s love with the world, a love that welcomes us just as we are. Welcome home. Amen.