



# We Tell This Story

## Luke 2:1-20

### *The Birth of Jesus*

2 In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. 2 (This was the first census that took place while[a] Quirinius was governor of Syria.) 3 And everyone went to their own town to register. 4 So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. 5 He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 7 and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them. 8 And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. 9 An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. 11 Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” 13 Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, 14 “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests.” 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let’s go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about.” 16 So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. 17 When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. 19 But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED WHAT 9-MONTH PREGNANT MARY WAS THINKING, while trying to stay comfortable while riding a donkey over the Judean hills, heading to be counted in a census so a foreign Caesar can get more money from his occupied territory? Did she ponder the angel’s pronouncement that heralded the beginning of her pregnancy 9 months earlier? Did she ponder in her heart if it must have been some sort of dream?

Because even if you can get your mind around the fact that you, a teenager from Nazareth, are going to become the mother of God, don't you think you'd start wondering when the perks that came with the job were going to arrive?

I suspect that the dislocation to Bethlehem as I were about to give birth would make me pause and ponder—this is how it goes when you're the mother of God? *Really?*

And then, after she's wrapped her baby in cloths she's pulled out of her suitcase, and tries to make herself as comfortable as you can be in a crowded guest space, they receive company!

Just what every woman wants right after she's given birth—*shepherds!*

It isn't often—it *isn't EVER*— that shepherds are the good news bearers in ancient society. The angels could have appeared at the country club. Or at the Temple. Or at the capitol building. Or in Hollywood. But the heavenly host did not go to the halls of power or influence. They went to people with no voice. People who were more comfortable with livestock than with humans become the bearers of the good news.

And this news, the shepherds realized, was too important to remain in Bethlehem.

Because this good news wasn't just for the people who already had the monopoly on good news. This was good news for all people.

This is such a different message than the shepherds had experienced in their lives. I wonder what they were pondering as they treasured that message in their hearts.

So, Mary's resting in the stable when in walk the shepherds. These shepherds look like they have just seen a ghost. Or perhaps an entire army of them. They silently walk into the room, as if they're afraid of what they'll find there. And then, when they see the new family, gathered around the feeding trough that holds a baby, they all start talking at once.

"The angel was right."

"*Here he is!*"

"Wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger—just like the angel said!"

Mary and Joseph can hardly understand them as they try to distinguish which words belong to which voice.

As Mary treasured their words and pondered them in her heart, was she thinking, "*This may not have happened as we would have scripted, but at least we're not alone in this. These shepherds have seen the angel too. But shepherds, God? Really?*"

Or maybe she wasn't surprised at all. We're told everyone else in the cow garage was amazed, but we're told Mary treasured their words and pondered. Maybe the appearance of shepherds as the first witnesses to Jesus' birth just confirmed to Mary that what she'd sung in the Magnificat was true.

"God's mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation... God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty..."

The appearance of shepherds as witnesses does evoke the world changing song she'd sung in the previous chapter.

Perhaps she looked at her son, asleep in the hay, and began to realize he wasn't someone she was really going to get to know as much as someone she would spend a long time pondering.

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I applaud, maybe even secretly admire, the people who speak with confidence of "knowing Jesus." The clarity in their declarations about how 'easy' faith is and their unwavering confidence that all we have to do is 'know Jesus' are not my experience of faith.

I am a *follower of Jesus*.

*My faith is in Jesus.*

But Jesus confounds me at every turn. God's message of grace, peace, and truth is denied in almost every area of our culture and politics. Yet I catch glimpses of it in unexpected generosity, in sacred moments, and so I keep on following. I keep on seeking.

If you are one of those people with a sure and certain faith, you just keep on keeping on. Because the world needs your clarity and hope.

I know many people, however, who leave religion all together when their faith is not sure and certain and they think certainty is what is expected.

And I know others who stick with it, but often feel inadequate or not quite faithful enough because they **ponder** and they **wonder** and they **question** and they **doubt** about things that don't make sense by the world's logic.

And so, if faith isn't about certainty for you, I want to encourage you to be okay with that.

The shepherds encountered mystery and it led them on a journey, although I'm not sure how clear it seemed to them as they were in the midst of it.

And Mary was a ponderer.

She leaves space for mystery and acknowledges that this is not, in any way shape or form, how she thought it was going to happen.

The entire Christmas story is one of wonder and pondering and mystery. **Any certainty is only in the knowledge that the world is not as it seemed to be before God became flesh.**

Christian Wyman, in his memoir, *My Bright Abyss*, writes:

*"Most believers seem to have had these magical moments of wonder and clearest consciousness, which suggested a dimension of existence beyond the everyday. Maybe it happened during childbirth, with music, in nature, in love or pain, or during a moment of overwhelming gratitude and exaltation."*

*"Religion is not made of these (magical) moments; religion is the means of making these moments part of your life rather than merely radical intrusions so foreign and perhaps even fearsome that you can't even acknowledge their existence afterward. **Religion is what you do with these moments** .... Faith ... preserves and protects that wonderful, terrible time when reason, if only for a moment, lost its claim on you."*

That's what I hear in the Christmas story. That's why I tell the story each year. From census to manger to shepherds to angels, the entire story reveals moments where reason loses its claim on us, and it then reminds us of those other times in our life where we have been in the presence of unknowable mystery.

I don't know how you see organized religion or faith. I don't know if it all comes easily to you or if it leaves you confounded. You may be here tonight because you're here every week or you may be here tonight because you're making your grandmother happy. *It's all good.* No matter how or why you decided to be here tonight, we have all been invited into the mystery of this story. And we're glad you're here.

But my prayer for us all is that we'll be open to pondering God's mysteries. And that we'll tell each other the stories of when we encounter it.

Reverend Amy Butler tells this story that happened to her in her early years of ministry in 1997, where she was working at a women's shelter in New Orleans. It was Christmas Eve. She writes: "I was trying, among my many other tasks that day, to sit at the telephone and call other shelters to see if any of them had room for some of the women in my shelter. In the meantime, I had the onerous task of turning people away, no more room in the inn, and watching them head back into the cold.

As the afternoon sun began to disappear, a woman came through the front door with two children about 10 and 12 — a boy and a girl. She was well-dressed, another person coming to do a holiday good deed, my cynical self-thought.

She approached the desk with tears in her eyes and explained that her husband had problems with drugs and that they left the house quickly before he became violent; she didn't have any family in town, no place to go that night, no money for a hotel.

She went on to explain that they had already been to every other homeless shelter in town, but no one had room for her and her kids. Could they please stay just one night until she could make arrangements to get to a friend in Mississippi?

With the words of Luke's gospel ringing in my head, "she wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn," I began to feel a deep kinship with the Innkeeper of Bethlehem.

There were too many people with too many crises. I didn't have enough space, and I couldn't allow them to stay. I calmly explained to the woman that I had no room whatsoever.

Firmly I told her I was very sorry, but she would have to find another solution. Her tears started in earnest, and she began to beg me to please help her — it was Christmas Eve!

I began to try to explain again that there was no way I could help — that I was sorry, but I had to abide by the rules of the shelter. As I tried to explain, I couldn't get the words out over the ringing of the front desk telephone.

It rang and rang and rang — "why doesn't someone get that?" I thought. I asked the woman to sit down for just a minute while I answered the telephone.

"Good afternoon, New Orleans Mission, can I help you?" I answered.

The woman on the other end of the telephone said, "This is a strange request, but I have already called all the other shelters in town, and no one seems to know what I am talking about."

"My name is Joyce Smith, and I am a member of Greater Saint Stephen's Full Gospel Baptist Church," she explained. "I live by myself, and I have a rather demanding job. But yesterday while I was praying, I felt God was telling me a family was coming to visit me and that family would need my help to have Christmas."

"I'm not exactly sure, but I think this family is a woman with two young teenagers," she continued. "I felt it so strongly that I went out yesterday to buy decorations and presents and food — I usually don't do Christmas that big on my own. And I got my house ready for them. Tree is up, presents are wrapped, ham is in the oven. But I've been trying since yesterday to find the family that God wants me to help. Do you have my family?"

I sat there in the chair behind the desk, exhausted from all the running and planning I had been doing. While I listened to the voice of Joyce Smith try to explain what even she knew sounded crazy, I looked across the lobby at the woman huddled in a row of chairs, holding her two kids close to her, trying to reassure them they'd be alright but sobbing quietly nonetheless.

I listened and I looked, and I finally said, "Just a moment, please." Then I crossed the lobby to the woman waiting and said, bewildered, "Excuse me, ma'am? I believe this call is for you."

Joyce Smith did come to pick the family up. They did spend Christmas with her, opening presents and sleeping safely. And they did get on a bus two days later to get to a friend who could help them."<sup>1</sup>

This is why we tell the story. Because it reminds us to be on the lookout for miracles, for God breaking into our lives in ways that make no sense and that we could not script ourselves. This night, as we leave here in candlelit silence to go home and await Christmas, I pray you will leave time for treasuring those moments we can't explain, pondering them in your heart. May it lead you through doubt, through questions, through certainty, and through mystery, to the Christ child.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://goodfaithmedia.org/a-christmas-miracle-i-had-to-live-to-believe/?fbclid=IwAR22XylwI7emp3gLyUkMWKhvj1Axi4D9URt14peUMuUmceM1N7NYOI7euu4>