

# Humble Origins

---

## **Luke 2:1-14 [15-20]**

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register. 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. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests.”

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.” So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger.

When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

**I** wonder what Jesus had to say about his birth. You know, when he will filling out forms at the DMV or applying for an American Express card. When he scrawled “Bethlehem” into the space where it asked for “Place of Birth,” did he pause to reflect on his humble beginnings? Who he was, where he had come from?

Our place of birth and the circumstances surrounding our birth say something about us. I was born in Chicago, for example, at Swedish Covenant Hospital, although my parents lived in Evanston at the time, just north of Chicago. My father was a seminary student, and he used to brag that the physician’s fee was fifty dollars, by which I think he meant he got a pretty good deal. My father, for whom thrift was a second religion, always relished getting a good deal.

Some of us prefer to hide our background. My wife, for example, assisting priest here at Christ Church, had what she regards as the misfortune of being born in Indiana. She seldom mentions that fact, preferring to say that she grew up here in Connecticut, thereby deftly eliding her true origins.

Sometimes we refer to the place and the circumstances of our birth in order to emphasize just how far we’ve come from modest beginnings. Politicians like to do that. Ronald Reagan talked about growing up in Dixon, Illinois. Bill Clinton grew up in a place called Hope, Arkansas. Jimmy Carter frequently referred to his birth and childhood on a peanut farm in Archer, Georgia, a satellite community of Plains. And if

you've ever visited Plains and the Carter homestead, you get a sense of how far Jimmy Carter moved from his modest origins to the governorship of Georgia to the presidency of the United States and then to a far more distinguished career as an ex-president, including the Nobel Peace Prize. And all of that from the humble beginnings of Archer, Georgia.

**B**ut what did Jesus say about his own birth? When the subject came up at school or in the locker room after soccer practice, what did he say? Did he seek to brush it off like someone might who had been born in Indiana, saying something vague like, "Yeah, I was born just up the road a bit from here"? The people in Jerusalem, after all, thought of Nazareth the way New Yorkers disdain Omaha or Des Moines or Lafayette, Indiana. "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Nathanael, one of the apostles, asked.<sup>1</sup>

Or did Jesus give the whole story? The stable. The cows and the sheep. The shepherds, the whole nine yards. Did he go into that?

One of the things that makes Christmas so difficult a topic for a preacher is that we have so succeeded in prettifying and sanitizing the story of Jesus in a manger. Mary has this beatific look on her face, Joseph looks on contentedly and protectively. The angels are suspended from the rafters, and even the cows are all doe-eyed. They're playing "Joy to the World" on Muzak in the background.

But at the risk of puncturing the serenity of our imaginations, I doubt that's how it all unfolded. Anyone who has given birth, or has been present when a mother gives birth, knows that *serenity* is not the first adjective that leaps to mind in describing the moment. Mary, no doubt, like every mother before her or since, did her share of

---

<sup>1</sup> John 1:46 (KJV).

screaming. Joseph, the stepfather, was probably worried about whether the child would like or accept him, not to mention that little matter of college tuition down the road. And this being a manger and all, I doubt that the frankincense and the myrrh were terribly effective against the stench of the stable.

**S**o what did Jesus say about his own birth? What did he think about his origins? Not much to brag about, really. When you consider the narrative arc of Jesus' life, he was born in a stable in Bethlehem, surrounded by farm animals, and he died the death of an outlaw some thirty-three years later in Jerusalem, about sixty-five miles to the south, hanging from timbers that – who knows? – may have been taken from that same manger. No rags to riches tale here. No accolades, no testimonial dinners. His entire career was defined by the way he tangled with the religious authorities, who demanded that he temper his radical teachings about the primacy of love; when he refused, they saw to his demise. No world travels or Nobel Peace Prize for this man born in a manger in Bethlehem.

What I love about that manger, the one we have scrubbed clean and disinfected and prettified over the centuries, is the raw earthiness of it. The Son of God arrived on earth in a stable, a smelly stable surrounded by farm animals and a bewildered stepfather. This is humanity in its rawest, most basic form, and there's nothing at all portentous about such beginnings. Still, all these centuries later, we gather tonight to honor that birth.

There's nothing at stake in this scene, of course – merely the drama of redemption and the fate of all humanity. This little boy, coming into the world in such humble circumstances, never traveled far from his birthplace. He never earned the plaudits of those in authority; in fact, quite the opposite. Only three decades or so after the manger scene,

the one with the cows and the shepherds and the Muzak and the angels dangling from the rafters, that same boy suffered an ignominious death less than a hundred miles away.

But because of what transpired in that stable in Bethlehem, nothing, nothing, was ever the same.

Eve of the Nativity

December 24, 2011

Christ Church

Middle Haddam, Connecticut