

“The Nativity”

Matthew 1:18-25

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We call it “the Nativity.” According to Merriam-Webster, the word “nativity” means “the process or circumstances of being born.” When you capitalize the “N” at the beginning of the word, “the Nativity” refers specifically to the process or circumstances of *Jesus* being born.

You all know the story. A young woman named Mary was pregnant. She was engaged to a man named Joseph. He was not the father. She had conceived in her womb through the power of the Holy Spirit of God. Joseph, “being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace” (Matthew 1:19), had planned to break the engagement quietly, until an angel told him what was *really* going on.

Mary and Joseph were living in Nazareth in Galilee at the time. But their ancestral homeland was in Bethlehem, some 90 miles to the south. Bethlehem lies just a few miles south of Jerusalem, in the Judean highlands. Some biblical scholars think that they may have moved to Nazareth to get some space and distance from the tense political situation caused by the Romans in and around Jerusalem.

Luke tells us that Joseph had to return to his homeland in Bethlehem because of a census that had been ordered by the Roman Emperor. Biblical scholars puzzle over that – the census we know about from other sources took place about ten years after King Herod’s death, yet Jesus was born while Herod was still living – but let’s not worry about that. Let’s just go to Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph.

Here is what Bethlehem looks like today, in the West Bank. It is a city of some 25,000 people, in a metropolitan area of about 200,000 people. It’s not exactly a “little town.” But if we go back in time ... well, here’s a sketch of what Bethlehem looked like a few hundred years ago. This would be much more similar to what Bethlehem looked like when Mary and Joseph came there, more than 2000 years ago.

The city is *very* old. It is mentioned in a letter that was written 14 centuries before Jesus was born. Archaeologists have found tombs that back to about 2000 BC. The book of Genesis records that Rachel, the wife of Jacob, the ancestor of all Israel, was buried in Bethlehem. (Genesis 48:7) In the 10th century BC, it was the birthplace of King David (1 Samuel 16). It had a wall surrounding it, to protect it from enemies. David’s grandson, King Rehoboam, added additional fortifications to the city. But it was not large. In the 8th century BC, the prophet Micah called it “one of the little clans of Judah.” It was Micah who first predicted that “one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from old, from ancient days” would come from Bethlehem. (Micah 5:2)

So Joseph and Mary made their way from Nazareth – which truly *was* an insignificant little village – to the more significant city of Bethlehem. Luke says that “while they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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.” (Luke 2:6-7) A “manger” is simply a feeding trough for animals. But the word “inn” – well, I hope this doesn’t ruin anybody’s Christmas, but we’re not really sure about the inn. The Greek word *kataluma* can mean “inn,” but it can also refer to a large chamber, like a dining room. It may be the case that Mary and Joseph had returned to Joseph’s ancestral *house* – and it was so full of people that they had to find someplace else to go. There is no mention of a “stable”; we just tend to assume that’s where the animals would have been.

But what many people don’t know is that Bethlehem, situated as it is in the hill country, is lined with caves. Many houses in Bethlehem were traditionally built above or in front of caves. Families didn’t need to build *stables* for their animals ... they just used the *caves* that were already there.

So, when there wasn’t room for them the house or the inn or whatever it was, Joseph and Mary probably retreated to a nearby *cave*. *Every early Christian writing that mentions the birthplace says it was a cave*. Here is what a Christian writer named Justin said in the second century: “when the Child was born in Bethlehem, since Joseph could not find a lodging in that village, he took up his quarters *in a certain cave* near the village; and while they were there Mary brought forth the Christ and placed Him in a manger, and here the Magi who came from Arabia found Him.” (Justin, *Dialogue with Trypho*) The notion that Jesus was born in a stable probably came from people living in other lands who weren’t familiar with Bethlehem’s topography or the traditional customs of its residents.

In about the year 135 the Roman emperor Hadrian – after crushing a Jewish revolt – expelled all the Jews who were living in and around Bethlehem, and set up a pagan shrine in the cave where Christians said Jesus was born. Makes sense, doesn’t it – kind of like a dog marking a spot that another dog had previously marked. This act appalled the Christians. Their sacred shrine had been desecrated.

But Christians reclaimed the site in the fourth century, after Emperor Constantine legalized Christianity. Constantine’s mother, a devout Christian, visited the Holy Land and identified a number of sacred sites that had been desecrated, including that cave. The pagan shrine was removed, and a church built over the cave. The front part of the church was situated directly over the cave – it would be like if there were a sacred cave drawing pilgrims from all over the known world *right here, right under our chancel*. There was a hole four meters wide, surrounded by railings, that looked down into the cave. The floor of the sanctuary was decorated with an elaborate mosaic – portions of which still exist today.

Later in the fourth century, the Christian scholar Jerome came to Bethlehem and established a monastery here. Jerome spent many years living and working at this holy site, translating the Bible into Latin – a masterful translation that became the “official” version of the Bible in the Catholic Church all the way up to the 20th century. When Jerome died, he was buried in a cave adjacent to the cave where Jesus was born. The sign in the cave identifies him as an “elder (presbyter) and teacher of the church.”

In the sixth century, the Emperor Justinian rebuilt the church, expanding it and making it more ornate. Now there were steps leading down from the chancel into the cave, allowing pilgrims into the

very room where Christ was born. That church – the Church of the Nativity – and those steps *still exist today*. I walked down those steps, into that cave, eleven months ago. The grotto down there is the oldest site anywhere in the world that has been continuously used as a place of Christian worship.

Persians invaded the Holy Land in the seventh century and destroyed many holy sites, but they did not destroy the Church of the Nativity. Why not? Because on the outside of the church there was an elaborate mosaic depicting the visit of the wise men to Bethlehem. The wise men were depicted in traditional Persian garb. That mosaic *saved* the church. (Never underestimate the power of art!)

In the eleventh century, Muslims destroyed many churches and other Christian sites in the Holy Land, but the Church of the Nativity was again spared. Church administrators had been allowing Muslims to hold devotions at a site immediately adjacent to the church for some time – for Muslims view Jesus as both a prophet and the Messiah, and they affirm his virgin birth, even if they deny his divinity, his sacrificial death on the cross, and his resurrection. The church administrators had been allowing Muslims to worship at Christ’s birthplace ... and that act of hospitality saved the church.

Between the 12th and 16th centuries the church fell into disrepair and became a frequent target for looters. There had originally been multiple entrances to the church, and the main entrance had been grand, but as a security measure church administrators sealed off some entrances and shrank the main entrance dramatically. That entrance is now called the “Door of Humility” because most people have to bend over to enter it. Humility is, of course, an appropriate response to the birth of Christ.

In 1834 there was an earthquake ... but the church survived. In 1847 a silver star marking the spot where Christ was born was stolen ... but the church survived. In 1869 a fire destroyed some of the furnishings in the cave ... but the church survived. By 2008 the roof was deteriorating and rainwater was seeping in ... but a massive, multi-million dollar renovation began in 2013. *The church will survive.*

Twenty centuries of Christian history are to be found in that church, and in the cave underneath it. It is not a perfect history. The pagan shrine, the thefts, the fire, even an episode in 2002 when about 50 armed Palestinians took refuge in the church from the Israel Defense Forces, causing international concern ... but it stands today as a testimony to the strength of the Christian hope and the power of the gospel. *This is where the Savior was born.* This is where *God* came to the earth, in human form.

And just as that church has continued to survive, through trial and tribulation, through 16 long centuries, so too does our *message* survive. Jesus Christ is *born!* God so loved this world that he came *here* to be with us, to save us and deliver us. That is the central message of the Nativity. That God came *here*. We can go *there*, to that holy site, into what is probably the very cave where Jesus was born. I did that. I saw the very spot! But the message that we find *there* is that God came *here*. *Emmanuel*, God-with-us. Whatever you are going through in life, whatever suffering or trials or temptations you may be dealing with, whatever our nation or our world may be struggling with, face it all with the firm and certain knowledge that God loved you so much that he came *here*, to *this* earth, to *this* existence, to be with *you*. You are not alone. You will *never* be alone. God *loves* you. God came *here* ... for *you*.

2019 Rev. Bill Pinches