

“So beautiful it has to be true.”

How many times have you heard St. Luke’s story of the Nativity? Even if you only hear it once a year on Christmas Eve you have heard it as many times as you have had birthdays. If you watch “A Charlie Brown Christmas” add that to the total. There are few stories, poems, or books that we have heard or read that often. Yet, the story of the Nativity of Jesus continues to fascinate us.

Whether you are a staunch believer, a twice-a-year Christian, or a nonbeliever the words of the story are beautiful and engrossing. We hear about a couple not yet married but engaged to be married. She was pregnant and would soon give birth, but that did not matter to the Roman rulers. She was forced to travel with Joseph, her fiancé, to Bethlehem, the town of his ancestry. Not his hometown but the place of the people from whom he was descended. Heaven knows how many generations ago that was.

The distance they traveled was over ninety miles. Less than two hours by car, but on foot a week or more. Traveling alone in the Judean hill country was dangerous, because of bandits and wild animals. Thus, they would have traveled on foot in a caravan. The many Christmas cards to the contrary, it is unlikely that Mary got to ride a donkey.

Needless to say, there was no Expedia, telephone, or internet to make reservations for their stay in Bethlehem. It was catch as catch can. When the couple arrived, there was no room to be found whether it was at an inn or the home of a relative. They had to settle for staying in a stable with the smells and noises that accompany domesticated animals. Do not think these were stables like at Salamander or Oak Hill. This barn had simple wooden stalls, hay, and stone feeding troughs.

As luck would have it, after this long journey Mary would go into labor. They were strangers in a strange town. It is doubtful they could locate a midwife. The other women in their group might have helped Mary give birth. Despite our beautiful creches with their wooden mangers, the baby’s cradle was one of those stone feeding troughs with a little hay for cushioning.

Meanwhile, in the hills nearby a group of shepherds were settling down to sleep. They would be dividing up the watch duty for the night. Some would rest and others would keep an eye out for wolves who would try to snatch an unguarded sheep in the dark. Shepherding was hard and dangerous. It was not work for the indolent or irresponsible.

As they were getting settled, suddenly the sky was brightened by an angel and then a whole army of angels. The shepherds are rightly frightened. Everyone who meets an angel in the Bible is frightened. The angel commands them not to be afraid, saying, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”¹

The shepherds do as they are told and head for Bethlehem. The scripture does not say that they took the sheep with them, but they must have. Imagine making the trek to the nearby village at night while also trying to keep together a group of sleepy

¹ Luke 2:10-12 KJV

sheep. What is a difficult journey in normal situations becomes arduous, but they made it. There they see the wonder of a little baby who has been born to save the world from its sinfulness.

Many of us love looking at babies. I do not think we look at them with any expectation or hopes. We simply gaze at them and love them in their tininess, fragility, and wonder. But imagine you have been told by a credible source that this baby is the one who will change the world and bring salvation to all people. What level of adoration would you be feeling then? The birth narrative ends with the shepherds returning home and Mary pondering in her heart the wonder of the moment.

The late Phyllis Tickle, who wrote extensively about religion, used to tell an anecdote about a talk she gave. At this church event the teen group served dinner, where they overheard the adults talk about the Virgin birth. They wondered was it historical, a metaphor, or pure fiction? During the discussion Phyllis noticed one of the teens was paying close attention. When the talk broke up, he approached Phyllis and said, “May I ask you something?”

Phyllis said, “Certainly! What about?”

“It’s that whole Virgin birth thing,” he said. “I don’t understand.”

“What don’t you understand,” Phyllis asked.

“I don’t understand what their problem is,” he said.

“What do you mean?” Phyllis asked.

“Well,” he said, “it’s just so beautiful that it has to be true whether it happened or not.”²

The beauty of the story transcends the issue of believability. The wonder of the story allows us to expand beyond the “seeing is believing” mindset of what is possible. To paraphrase Jesus, “People may think something is impossible, but with God all things are possible.”³

And so, it is this Christmas Eve over two thousand years since the birth of Jesus that we are here on this still and silent night to remember and relive the birth of a baby born to insignificant parents, from an insignificant town, in an insignificant country which was a backwater of an empire, on what was an insignificant day, in and otherwise unremarkable year. A child whose short life would change the world so much that we come together tonight to take part in the ongoing story that is so beautiful it must be true.

²Phyllis Tickle with Tim Scorer, *Embracing Emergence Christianity: Phyllis Tickle on the Church’s Next Rummage Sale, A 6-Session Study*, Morehouse Education Resources, Denver, CO.: 2011, 28.

³ Matthew 19:26