

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF MARY:

4. REGISTERED

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Luke 2:1-7

My daughter's birthday is in late June. So, in early April, shortly before she was born, when my wife was six months pregnant, I sent out an email to family and some close friends. In this email, I explained how excited my wife and I were about the upcoming birth of our child. And we wanted everyone to know of a decision that we had made.

As I explained, in preparation for the birth, we had taken the birthing classes and had been given a tour of the hospital's delivery ward. After that tour, we decided that we did not want our child born into such a cold, sterile environment. We decided that she should be born in the loving environment of our home. To facilitate this, we had secured the services of a midwife—a lovely Jamaican woman named Odette. Not only had we met Odette, but she had already blessed our home and exorcised all the demons and negative energy. We were guaranteed a safe birth.

This email went out and the responses I received fell into three categories. Those in the first group were entirely cool with the idea of a midwife. They thought it was rather progressive of us. The second group politely but firmly expressed their opinion that they thought we were making a mistake, that the child should be born properly in a hospital. Then there was the third group. They were the ones who said, "You all realize that this is from Sherard. He wrote this and sent it on April 1st. This is his April Fools prank." And they were right. It was an April Fools prank (and a pretty good one, too).

To be clear, I fully support the idea of midwifery. It is an ancient and honorable practice. But that was not our style and we fully intended that our child be born in a hospital—as sterile as possible. And she was, and everything went smoothly.

In most birthing scenarios, the parents hold some level of control over the situation. There is the issue of timing; babies set their own delivery schedule. But this is to be expected and we take it into account. Parents are still able to plan where they want the child to be born and who they want to be present. And barring any extraordinary circumstances, it usually works out. However, as we see in our reading this morning, for Mary and Joseph, this was not the situation. All control over the birth of their child was stripped away.

Caesar Augustus was emperor of the Roman empire. As emperor, he issued a decree that everyone in the empire must be registered in a census.

For the inhabitants of the empire, a census is not just a tabulation of the population, it is a blunt political act rooted in power. For the people of Israel, a census meant that the occupying empire is forcibly registering each resident. The purpose of a census was not limited to just determining the population of a region, but also to assess and collect taxes, and to conscript men for military service.

According to the gospel of Luke, for this census, each person was required to register in the town of their birth. For Joseph, this meant traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem, a distance of approximately 90 miles—two hours in a car, three or four days on foot. His betrothed—his fiancée—Mary, had to travel with him from Bethlehem even though she was pregnant. The empire didn't care. And while they are in Bethlehem, Mary's child decides that it is ready to be born. As Luke describes so succinctly, *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.*

So much has been written about that one sentence that we could paint the moon with all the ink. Although we know these words by heart, let's take a few moments and go through them.

First, let's look at that statement, *there was no place for them in the inn.* The word inn is the traditional word here, but it is not the best translation. The word should be something like "guest room." It is the same word used to describe the "upper room" where, at the end of his life, Jesus will celebrate the Passover Meal with his disciples.

In those days, the typical private home would have a main room for the family. Then there would be a room for animals. An equivalent space today would be our garage. Then, over that space was a loft—the upper room—that was separate from the family space on the first floor. This is the place where guests could stay.

At the time of a census, you can be sure that the people of Bethlehem were renting out sleeping space and squeezing in as many people as possible. It would appear that Mary and Joseph were able to rent a space, but not in the upper room. Their space was down with the animals. Or, as some have suggested, they were able to secure a space in the guest room, but when the baby decided to make its appearance, they needed to relocate to a place with more privacy for the intimate moment of giving birth.¹ We'll never know the details, but we do know that Mary gave birth to her first son in less than ideal circumstance completely beyond her control. She didn't have a blanket for her newborn child so she improvised and wrapped him in strips of cloth. For a crib she used as the animals' feed trough.

¹When I was in Bethlehem, our guide pointed out that the area is littered with small caves. These caves are ideal places to keep animals. All you need was a fence around the mouth of the cave to create a paddock. A house could be built on or next to one of these caves.

If we engage our imaginations, we could say that a modern Mary gave birth to her child out in the garage. She wrapped the child in some feed sacks and let him sleep in the bed of the pickup.

Throughout the weeks of Advent, I've been preaching this series called "Christmas Through the Eyes of Mary" and reading from the Gospel According to Luke. Luke tells us how an angel named Gabriel first visited an old priest named Zechariah to tell him that his wife Elizabeth would have a child, something everyone thought was impossible given her age. The angel next visits a young woman named Mary in the town of Nazareth of Galilee and tells her that she also will have a child. This child will be great, it will be special, it will be the son of God. Mary commits herself to God when she tells the angel, Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word. And the angel departs. Mary then travels south to visit her cousin Elizabeth because the angel has told Mary about Elizabeth also being pregnant.

Through this series, we have observed that Mary is indeed special because of her faith in God. She also understands her place in relation to God—that God is God and that she is human. It is this sincere humility that allows her to give herself wholly in service to God and God's plan—a plan that extends back for generations.

Throughout the Old Testament we read prophecies of a messiah—a savior for the people. For example, in 2 Samuel God says, *I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever* (2 Samuel 7).

And in Micah we read, *But you, O Bethlehem... from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel* (Micah 5:2).

At the time of Mary and Joseph, the people of Israel also sought a savior, a messiah. Their enemy was not sin and death, but it was the Romans who had taken over their country. The Judeans were hoping for a warrior king, powerful and strong, a leader to vanquish all foes, and make them free.

The emperor Caesar Augustus had managed to bring an end to a long period of war within the Roman lands and effectively established the empire. For this, he was hailed as a prince of peace. His reign was labeled the *Pax Romana* or Roman Peace. Some called it the *Pax Augusta*. The people proclaimed, "Caesar is Lord."

Roman peace, however, came at a cost. Augustus brutally murdered any perceived enemies. He suppressed human rights and liberties. He became an authoritarian dictator. He achieved peace by coercion and oppression and control. Knowing this, Luke's words take on an ominous air: *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered*. This was his peace.

It is against this backdrop of Roman peace that an angel goes to a young woman living in Galilee. She is at the edge of the empire—about as far from Rome as one can get—both in terms of geography and power. Especially power. On the geopolitical stage, she is inconsequential.

She has power, but not the power of an empire. Hers is the power of a kingdom—God’s holy kingdom. Her power can be found in her willingness to serve her God with all her being. The emperor may force her to register to the empire. But, in her heart, she is registered to God.

I have no doubt that if Mary had her druthers, she would have wanted the birth to take place under different conditions. I'm sure she would have preferred to have been at home in Nazareth with her support system of friends and family to help her through the birth of her first child. Maybe she had an aunt who was a gifted midwife, someone who loved her and would watch out for her.

But she wasn't in Nazareth. She was in Bethlehem forced there by powers over which she had no control. And in Bethlehem, other than Joseph, there was no one to look out for her, to help her. And when she went into labor, she was forced to give birth among animals. And when the child was born was family there to surround it with love? No, but some shepherd did stop by with crazy talk about an angel.

There is nothing about this birth that even hints at Mary and Joseph having any power or control. The holy family are pawns sent from Nazareth to Bethlehem, from a house to a stable, from family to shepherds, from warm blankets to strips of torn cloth, from a proper crib to a feeding trough.

Why was Jesus born in a stable? It is a sign that God is not concerned with power as we understand it. It is the sign that salvation is available to all people—not just the powerful and the wealthy, but even the very least of these, especially the least of these. We are saved by an infant, not a warrior. We are saved by the one who, for the entirety of his life, would teach that we must love our neighbors, feed the hungry, reach out to the helpless, show compassion for the needy.

On this fourth Sunday of Advent, this Christmas Eve, let us commit ourselves to be living signs of God’s presence, not signs of power but signs of vulnerability, of humility, grace, and love.

Amen.