

WHERE JESUS IS

Is. 9:1-7; Luke 2:1-20

It will not seem so tonight, but Christmas for the Christian faith is really a kind of afterthought. The birth of our faith is Easter and the rising of Jesus from the oblivion of death by crucifixion. That is the beginning of things. That is the essential Christian mystery. It is the resurrection that all the New Testament authors have in mind when they sit down to write, and this is true for St. Luke when he sits down to write his story of the Nativity some 40-50 years after Jesus' crucifixion. The beginning is a bit of pastoral folk poetry intended to help his readers understand who the resurrected one is.

The way Luke tells it Joseph and Mary were residents of Nazareth in Galilee. They have come to Bethlehem to satisfy the demand of the Roman census that residents of the Empire travel to their place of origin to be enrolled. This is in contrast to the birth story in Matthew where it is assumed that Jesus is born in Bethlehem because that is where Mary and Joseph lived. Was Jesus really born in Bethlehem at all? Or did Luke and Matthew simply craft their stories of Jesus' birth so that he might seem to better fulfill Jewish expectations of the messiah? Well, don't worry about it. The purpose of the stories is not geographical. It is to say that the resurrected one is a true child of God. That is the point!

Luke goes on to tell us that Jesus was born during the reign of Caesar Augustus, whom we know ruled from 27 BCE to 14 CE. There is no independent confirmation that there was a Roman census of the entire Empire during that period. There was an

enrollment for the purpose of taxation in the province of Syria when Quirinius was governor, but that occurred in the year 6 CE. This enrollment, by the way, led to an uprising by the Jews and an insurrection in Galilee that Rome had some difficulty putting down. So it seems that Luke has got his dates wrong. Further, it is improbable that a Roman census would have required a man to go to the home of his ancestors, and there is no reason that his betrothed or his wife would have had to go with him, unless she was just looking to get out of the house. Again, the point of Luke's telling of the story is not historical accuracy but testimony to awaken belief in the crucified Christ.

One more thing to acknowledge before we get down to business. When Luke writes his Gospel of the crucified Christ, he does so with the poor and oppressed and outcast and especially with women in mind. As a case in point, note that Luke has humble shepherds witness the birth in contrast to Matthew, who brings in kings or wise ones or merchants from afar, presumably people of standing, bringing with them what might very well be expensive birthday gifts.

All this having been said, I think it would be unwise for anyone to go to the Gospels of Luke or Matthew to learn the history of Jesus' origins. The stories are, as I say, an afterthought, which is not to say that they have nothing to teach us. Besides the principal lesson that Jesus is the spirit of God in the flesh, we are encouraged by these stories to believe that his parents are from the lower classes and living in a land occupied by a foreign empire with the power to impose its will on those it has conquered. The matter of taxation by the Empire is suggested in the story and with it, as is almost always the case with the issue of taxation, comes the problem of fairness and privilege and equity and what it means to be a society of people. Jesus will spend the greatest part of his ministry,

according to Luke, speaking to these questions. He will not say much about religious doctrine. He says little about sexual ethics. What he does talk about is the justice that comes of loving God and neighbor. The biblical tradition he inherits is dominated by questions of justice and oppression. Beyond this, as a colonial subject of the Roman Empire, he was born into a world of hunger and poverty, turmoil and tumult, and it is to this world that he speaks.

This Christmastime, all the talk in our land is debt and taxes. Into the midst of this conversation, if it can be called a conversation, the Occupy Wall Street Movement has come forward to demonstrate that the fundamental issue underlying the nation's debt crisis and tax controversies is the fact of vast and growing economic inequality. The strength of the movement lies in the simplicity of its message: the few are rich, the many are not well off, and this is no accident. Nearly 60 million manufacturing jobs have disappeared from the United States since 2000, and more than 40,000 factories have closed. In this current recession, African Americans have endured the greatest loss of collective assets in their history. Hispanics have seen their net worth drop by two-thirds. In terms of its pretensions, the capitalist system has failed; in terms of its powers of repression the system chugs right along.

The New Testament portrays Jesus, his family, and with few exceptions everyone else he encountered as impoverished and oppressed in one way or another. Yet from the picture of Jesus that is common in the church and especially insistent at Christmastime, he seems to have been little touched by the realities of his world and his message only narrowly spiritual and focused on citizenship in heaven. In this way, Jesus only *seems* to dwell in human society as a flesh and blood human being, and if he is concerned at all

with change, it is only in changing the behavior of individuals and not in challenging the social order in which individuals live and which forms them. According to this way of thinking, Jesus was executed not for political reasons but because he offended the religious sensibilities of the Jewish authorities. If there was a political component in his execution, it is thought to be only that his nonpolitical motives were misunderstood. Thus, Jesus is made meek and mild, a lamb led to the slaughter. Except that the charge for which he was crucified was seeking to replace Rome's sovereignty over Israel with the sovereignty of God, whose will is justice and equity. Jesus' crime was sedition for which the penalty was death on the cross. Not to recognize this is to deny the circumstances of Jesus' life as well as his example to the poor and oppressed. In this way, the hard circumstances into which Jesus is born go essentially unacknowledged by the church that bears his name, leaving the baby at Christmastime to sleep in heavenly peace.

In this bleak midwinter of our economic and social discontents, and on this particular Christmas Eve, it might, under the influence of Luke's Gospel, be a good exercise to think about where the birth of Jesus might take place in our world. So doing, we can say with assurance that the birth site will not be in the homes of the top one percent, the Wall Street bankers and hedge-fund managers and corporate executives—no one who has any sense at all of who Jesus is can imagine Jesus being born into luxury. But neither is it to the point if we imagine him born generally and vaguely into the homes of the other 99 percent, populated by fine people, no doubt, who surely have their problems and who may in some sense be poor in spirit. By the account of the Bible and what we know of the biblical world of Jesus, he is born into poverty, born into that place

in our world that the politicians—conservatives never and liberals hardly ever these days—do not want to talk about as they propose their policies to entice the votes of the middle class.

The point of this little thought experiment is that *it is for us to go where Jesus is*. Whether we are part of the 99 percent—let’s say the shepherds—or part of the one percent—let’s say the three kings from afar—it is for us to go to Jesus, to pick ourselves up and go to where he is and to do what he does in our own place and time. That is the Christian faith.

At this moment on this Christmas Eve, together in this place, we thank God for the good news of God’s love, radiating out from the most humble birthplace to touch us all and *to draw us in...* if we will go... if we will go to where Jesus is. The invitation has been made. And it is called Christmas. Amen.

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Emanuel Lutheran Church