

FIRST LESSON: Isaiah 9:6  
SECOND LESSON: Luke 2:1-14  
December 4, 2022  
**SECOND SUNDAY IN ADVENT**

### ***“A Child Is Born”***

Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A pastor was addressing the children during the Christmas service. “Who is the mother of Jesus?” he asked them.

Without hesitation, dozens of tiny voices chorused back “Mary.”

“That's right. Now can anyone tell me who the father of Jesus is?”

There was a bit of quiet and fidgeting. No one told them this was going to be a quiz. Then a young girl spoke up and boldly announced, “I know! It's Verg.”

After a few seconds of silence the entire congregation erupted in laughter. She blushed but she stood her ground. “Of course it is,” she said, “we all know it, it's the Verg ‘n Mary.”

Luke's gospel tells us, “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.” There are some problems with this statement, because in fact Quirinius wasn't governor of Syria until the year 6 CE. He conducted a census at that time. Quirinius held another post from 10 to 7 B.C., and it's possible that is what Luke writes about, but there is no record of a general census of the Roman Empire under Augustus. Augustus was probably mentioned by name because he is the one who was hailed as the Prince of Peace. It was a peace brought about through sheer political power and conquest, but nevertheless, a form of peace. Wars ended and trade flourished.

Aside from the purposes of God, we don't know why Joseph felt obliged to drag Mary with him on an 85 to 90 mile journey across rocky terrain while heavily pregnant. While we always see Mary riding on a donkey, there is no mention of a donkey in scripture. She could have walked. It is possible that she was being shunned by people in her community for getting pregnant and did not want to stay behind without Joseph to defend her. All we really know is that the couple made their way to Bethlehem, and when they got there, Bethlehem was a mob scene. Picture an airport during the Thanksgiving rush.

Unlike our popular nativity plays, Mary did not go into labor the moment they arrived in town. That's not what Luke's gospel says. It says, “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 space in the guest room.” While they were there means they could have actually been in town for weeks.

And yes, those who have been at Penn Wynne for awhile know that I also continue to wreck Christmas pageants every year with the fact that there was no inn. Bethlehem was too small and too far off the beat and track to have inns. Furthermore, inns were basically no better than brothels, and no respectable man in his right mind would bring his wife to one. What Luke's gospel says is that there was no room for them in the guest room. The word is *kataluma*. Private homes often had storage rooms that doubled as guest rooms. Unlike American ideas of privacy and space, guests didn't have their own rooms. They would have been crammed in together. It was expected that people would take in relatives, and even strangers, and temporarily displace the objects in storage. The most likely place Mary and Joseph would have gone would have been to Joseph's extended family. In this case the *kataluma*, or guest room was already full of other people. But it would have been unthinkable for Joseph to come into town with Mary and be turned away. There was no room, but somehow room had to be found.

The original audience for this story would have been able to picture the scene that followed perfectly. In a typical Judean peasant house there was an area near the door, generally with a dirt floor, where the animals slept at night. That way they couldn't be stolen, and in the absence of a furnace, their body heat was useful. The family lived and slept in a raised part of the same room. Peasants didn't have individual bedrooms. They all lived and slept together. The guest room was either upstairs on the roof or adjoining the common family room. It wouldn't have been very large, no more than a storage area when there weren't guests. The lower area near the door would have had one or two mangers with hay and water for the animals. In Bethlehem these mangers were generally hollowed out stone. They couldn't be moved. They did make a handy crib, however, because all you needed to do was put the animals outside, add a little straw, swaddle the baby in clothes and put the child in. The baby would be safe, and mom could get on with her chores. Jesus was not the only child laid in a manger. This was standard procedure in a peasant family. It was convenient and it was practical.

So here's what probably happened. The guest room was small and already crammed with people. There was "no room." Mary and Joseph were given space with the family. When she went into labor all the women would have gotten busy and shooed Joseph and the men outside. The men would have sat around the fire smoking, talking and keeping Joseph calm. In time-honored tradition Mary would have given birth in the main room of the house and Jesus would have entered the world in the presence of lots of people, and because it was night, quite a few curious animals.

This makes perfect sense of the story we have in scripture. When the first hearers of this story were told that Jesus was placed in a manger they would no doubt have thought—"Oh, I know where they are, they're in the main family room!" Why were they there? *Because the guest room was full—there was no room.* They probably would have thought, "Well, under the circumstances, she was probably better off in the main room anyway." This interpretation makes even more sense when we consider the shepherds. They were watching their flocks at night when they received word of the miraculous birth. But shepherds

were from the lowest ranks of society. They would not have felt able to visit the grand house of a king. But what were they told? “You will find the child wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.” In other words, **this is a peasant home**. It’s okay to go there. This isn’t the home of some wealthy merchant or ruler. It’s a simple two-room house like everyone has.

Jesus was born into a peasant family in a busy, complex world. He came into a world dominated by Caesar Augustus. We live in a world dominated by people like Caesar Augustus. Jesus wasn’t born the way the pretty pictures on Christmas cards portray his birth in peace and solitude. It was noisy. People would have been talking and laughing, babies crying, fires burning, food cooking and animals settling down for the night. There was no room, so everyone just squeezed over and made room. He wasn’t born into wealth and he did not grow up in splendid isolation with plenty of time to meditate on the wonders of creation. He was born into a family, and he grew up in a household where everyone pulled together to survive.

To us a son is given. A child is born. A child who will grow to be a man who will change the world. Jesus, our Emmanuel, knows what real life is from the inside out. We often forget that. We think that God doesn’t know about the struggles of family life and of making ends meet. But God does know. God knows life from the inside out. And God will help us navigate all that life brings, today, tomorrow and forever. Amen

Isaiah 9:6

<sup>6</sup> For to us a child is born,  
to us a son is given,  
and the government will be on his shoulders.  
And he will be called  
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,  
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Luke 2:1-14

<sup>2</sup> In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> And everyone went to their own town to register.

<sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, <sup>7</sup> and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.

<sup>8</sup> And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. <sup>9</sup> An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all

the people. <sup>11</sup> Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”