

Ponder the Gift

Luke 2:1-7

‘Tis the season for all sorts of things—parties, gift giving, lots and lots of food, time with family.

It is also the season for ugly Christmas sweaters. We all have them. We just can’t seem to turn loose of them. We wear them maybe one time a year and it takes a lot of courage to do even that.

I saw a photo of one the other day that certainly qualifies. It’s a real doozy. It has a picture of Jesus and just below is the words, “*Birthday Boy.*” Indeed he is.

In the midst of all that goes on this season of the year it is all too easy to forget that Jesus is the reason for the season. It is his birth we celebrate.

Just last Wednesday at Awana the kids sang Happy Birthday to Jesus, which I thought was spot on.

Tonight and tomorrow night the kids will sing yet again. It shouldn’t surprise any of us that one of their songs is *Celebrate the Birthday.*

Christ has come. Born of lowly estate he would grow to live, die, and rise again. He would usher in a brand new Kingdom. He would offer new life to all who would give their lives to him. Abundant life now and eternal life later on would be the order of the day.

We have every reason to celebrate—‘tis the season.

Born in Time

Every year at Christmas as we celebrate Christ’s birth we are reminded of the night when Christ was born.

The Gospel of Luke records that Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Quirinius served two terms—one from 6 B.C. to 4 B.C. and another from 6 A.D. to 9 A.D. A census was taken during each of those terms and since scripture mentions the “*first census,*” as the one taken leading up to Christ’s birth we can infer that Jesus was actually born somewhere around 6 B.C.

Regardless of the actual date of his birth, we can very clearly assert that Luke went to great lengths to put Christ’s birth in the mix of history. The story of Christ’s birth is not something made up.

Jesus actually lived. He was born into this world. Jesus was born in time and lives to this day.

A Long and Arduous Journey

The census mentioned in scripture was the real deal. Everyone was required to travel to the town of their ancestry to be registered.

Joseph was of the line of David, so he and Mary were off to Bethlehem where David, his ancestor was born.

The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem is about 80 miles as the crow flies. It's about 120 miles if you take the route around what was Samaria.

Regardless, the trip Mary and Joseph took was long and arduous, particularly given the fact that Mary was so far along with her pregnancy.

While visiting the Holy Land a few years back and re-tracing the route that Mary and Joseph more than likely took to get to Bethlehem, I couldn't help but think how tough their journey was.

You and I have been on a journey as well. It may not have been on the back of a donkey, but it has been a journey nonetheless.

The days of Advent have had their ups and downs. The reality of life has a way of making its way into the high idealism of this season. Let's face it, Christmas is not always easy.

You and I have such high expectations and many of those don't always come to pass. We wish things were perfect, but soon realize that life is just not that way.

Relationships can be troubling, grief can weigh us down, finances can be a drag, and fatigue can take its toll.

Take heart. Do not be afraid. Just as God was with Mary and Joseph on their journey, so he is with us on ours.

A Borrowed Stable

After traveling the hundred miles or so from Nazareth to Bethlehem, it's quite interesting that Mary and Joseph found themselves in a borrowed stable and it was there in that most uncommon place that Jesus was born.

It should not be lost on us that Christ was born in a humble stable so that later we might inherit a room in his "*Father's house.*"

After their long and arduous journey, Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, only to be greeted with the frustration of not being able to find a place to stay. There was no *Trivago* back in those days.

Cheryl and I found ourselves in the same sort of predicament back when she was pregnant with Brian. We were on our way to North Carolina to visit some friends and couldn't find a place to stay. There were "No Vacancy" signs all along I-40.

The University of Tennessee had a home football game that night and every hotel room for miles was booked. We finally just gave up on finding a room and drove straight through to our destination. It was a long night, particularly for Cheryl.

"Well, at least, you're not riding a donkey," I remember saying. That didn't seem to help very much.

Every Christmas we remember the benevolent innkeeper making room for two young people ready to give birth to their son. We appreciate so much his kindness and compassion.

He provided a place for them to stay, as humble as it was, out of the goodness of his heart.

It comes to us to make room for him as well.

The thing about Jesus is this: If we make him room he will come and take up residence. He will fill our lives with his glory, no less than the way he filled the manger with glory the night of his birth.

You and I both know that all the stuff that comes along with this season of the year has a way of crowding out the Lord. Even now you may feel more that a bit overwhelmed

Christmas leaves us with so many gifts to buy, so many people to see, so many things to do that it's all too easy to leave Jesus on the outside looking in.

Here just a couple of days from Christmas you might even feel a degree of regret that you *"didn't get it all done."*

E. B. White in his book, *The Second Tree from the Corner* writes, *"To perceive Christmas through all the wrappings becomes more difficult with every year."* E. B. White

We get so *"wrapped up,"* if you will, in the mad dash to Christmas that we run the risk of missing the reason for our celebration in the first place.

Jesus wants us to make him room. He longs to be a part of our lives.

"Here I am," says Jesus, *"I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him and that person with me."* (Revelation 3:20)

In the end, Christmas is a matter of hospitality.

I'm not talking about parties and get-togethers, but about a heart that offers Christ a warm and faith-filled welcome, even when there seems to be absolutely no room to spare.

You and I need to make him room.

The Greatest Gift of All

One of the great things about Christmas is receiving cards from friends and loved ones. More and more those cards feature photographs of the family and, in particular, the kids.

Our friends, Michael and Reagan Barnum have five children. We received a Christmas card from them a couple of years ago that proudly displayed photographs of all five kids.

I've never forgotten that card and, especially what they wrote on the back. "*With five young children,*" they shared, "*we often receive comments like, 'You have your hands full.'*"

Whereupon we usually reply, 'Oh, but they are such a blessing.'

We love the simple pleasures of raising honey bees, skipping rocks, making mud pies and creating wildflower bouquets.

Our daily activities are not noteworthy, but our daily focus is. Seeking God's blessings in all things!

We often expect God to show up in bold ways and while waiting for that we miss His quiet, uncomplicated beauty—the giant spider web, a dark summer night full of a thousand fireflies, or the quiet of a snowfall.

We pray that you take time to seek these blessings and so many more in your own life."

Now that's a Christmas blessing.

Hopefully, in the midst of all the press and stress of Christmas, you and I are learning that in the simple things of life are found the most profound blessings of all—much like that of a lowly manger, two faithful parents, and the greatest gift ever given.

We celebrate that gift today and, with faith look to make that gift a greater part of our lives.

An Experiment in Perception

Matt LeRoy writing in *The Seedbed Daily Text* references *Washington Post* columnist Gene Weingarten who did what he called "*an experiment in perception.*"

Weingarten set out to see if, in an unexpected setting and at an inconvenient time, beauty would transcend.

Weingarten enlisted the help of world-renowned violin virtuoso Joshua Bell, asking him to play in a bustling Washington D.C. Metro Station during rush hour.

Just days before, Bell had played to a sold out Boston Symphony Hall, where many of the tickets went for \$100 each.

So there he was, a treasured talent playing like a common street performer.

In the forty-five minutes Bell played thousands of people passed by. Only twenty-seven paused long enough to drop a little change in his hat and only seven people stopped for any length of time to take in the beauty of the moment. Only one recognized who he was.

In the routine of the everyday, in the rush of the moment, almost everyone failed to perceive the beauty that was in their midst.

We are called to pause, to perceive, to take in the great thing that is before us. After all, God is present in unexpected settings and at inconvenient times.

The story we hear today is repeated every year and we acknowledge that it is indeed good news, but do we really experience it?

It comes to us to ponder yet again the great gift that is Jesus.

To you, this very well may seem like a very inconvenient time, why with everything you have to do. It very well may seem out of context with all the lights and glitter that work to blind you to what God has done.

Nonetheless God continues to speak a good word into your life and into the life of the world. It comes to us to recognize that.

So we hear it now, just as we will hear it repeated over the next couple of days, *“Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; and he is Christ the Lord. This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger.”* (Luke 2:10-12)

Let's look for that sign then. Let's ponder the gift and rejoice.