



CHRISTMAS

LECTIONARY COMMENTARY

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Lection - Luke 2: 1-7 (New Revised Standard Version)

(v. 1) In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (v. 2) (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor Syria.) (v. 3) And everyone went to his own town to register. (v. 4) So Joseph 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. (v. 5) He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be

married to him and was expecting a child. (v. 6) 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 room for them in the inn.

I. Description of the Liturgical Moment

Although the celebration of the birth of Jesus may be second in significance to Easter on the church's calendar, it is, arguably, first in importance in the church's heart. No other annual celebration generates as much widespread engagement and participation, and includes former members who return home for Christmas. Youth practice and present nativity plays and pageants; choirs rehearse and perform special music; boards and organizations host annual Christmas gatherings; and, old stories and hymns are, ideally, preached and sung again, as if they are being preached and sung for the very first time.

Though unquestionably significant today, "Jesus' birthday" was not an instant hit with the church. The earliest linkage of Christ's birth with December 25 is a reference book for Christians written in AD 221: Chronographiai authored by Sextus Julius Africanus. Notably, early Church father, Tertullian, does not list the date among major feast days in the Church of Roman Africa, and, in AD 245, noted church theologian, Origen, actually denounced the notion of commemorating Christ's birthday "as if he were a king pharaoh." A survey of the history of Christmas reveals that popular acceptance of the day has as much to do with historic events and governmental legislation as it does theological reflection and spiritual fervor.

It is important to remember that along with Christmas, many African-American Christians now celebrate Kwanzaa, a week-long familial communal observance of *unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith*. The kinship of these ideals with the Christian faith is obvious. Thus, to exclude Kwanzaa and its ideals from the content and presentation of Christmas worship and preaching is to miss a golden opportunity to affirm familial and cultural commitment as a vital dimension of faith growth and development.

II. Biblical Interpretation for Preaching and Worship: Luke 2: 1-7

Part One: The Contemporary Contexts of the Interpreter

Contemporary worship and preaching at Advent and Christmas does well to note two prevailing challenges associated with the holiday season: debilitating busyness and widespread consumerism. The challenges characterize the season so much that the entire period between Thanksgiving and Christmas has been dubbed "the holiday crush and rush." "A different rush" is the goal of wholesome Christmas worship: *The rush of a fresh experience of Emmanuel, "God with us."*

Moreover, Advent and Christmas preaching and worship should find more ways to address the matter of holiday depression. Many persons are at an emotional low point during this seasonal high. The sadness may be linked to negative past events that occurred during the holiday season or to recent struggle or sorrow, e.g., severe financial strain or the death of a family member or

friend. Whatever the cause, holiday depression is real, and church members, including pastors and preachers, are not immune to it. In addition to sensitizing worship and sermonizing with the foregoing in mind, some churches include “Blue Christmas” Church Services on their calendar. For resources see section III below. Also see the Christmas worship resources for additional information.

Part Two: Biblical Commentary

The text chronicles the first and most important unit of Luke’s story of the birth of Jesus, the birth itself. Luke’s other units are the announcement to the shepherds (vv.8-20) and the circumcision and naming (v.21). Historic accuracy is questionable regarding Luke’s account. For example, the census referred to in Luke 2:1-2 is not confirmed by other historical evidence. However, Luke’s primary contribution lay not in unchallenged historic facts, but in his testimony of a *God who works through ordinary people in natural ways that can have supernatural impact*. Fred B. Craddock observes the following in his commentary on Luks:¹

Beyond any argument as to Luke’s historical sources is his basic conviction that Emperors, governments, and laws serve the purpose of God, often without knowing it. In this, Luke agrees with Isa.45:1. Caesar Augustus is more than a date for the story; he is an argument of God’s will. There does not have to be a miracle or an unusual event for God to be at work. God works miracles in Luke, to be sure, but God works without them, too.

Regarding contemporary application, Luke’s precise poignant birth narrative is ripe with promise. Joseph’s and Mary’s traveling allows for reflection on the theme of *journey*. The challenge of movement under conditions of physical distress invites commentary on the theme of *struggle*. The birth itself, speaks of *the insistence of life amid strife and death*. As the late legendary theologian Howard Thurman writes in a selection entitled “Merry Christmas”:²

Welling up out of the depths of vast vitality, there is Something at work that is more authentic than the formal, discursive design of the human mind. As long as this is true ultimately, despair about the human race is groundless.

Perhaps the most important contemporary message of this text concerns our need to value children and matters related to children more. In 2002, the Children’s Defense Fund reported the following startling statistics regarding children in the United States:

One child is reported abused or neglected every 11 seconds.
One child is born into poverty every 43 seconds. Nearly 12 million children are poor.
One child is born without health insurance every minute.
One child or teenager is killed by gunfire every two hours and 40 minutes.

There is no better time than at the birth of the Christ-Child to focus light on challenges confronting children in the United States and throughout the world. An especially neglected group of children to be considered are children of the incarcerated. This is of extreme significance to the African American community since inmates in this country are

disproportionately African American, Hispanic, or other people of color. For helpful resources on addressing children's issues, see section III below.

Celebration

In his moving and rhythmic, "I Saw God," on his *Palmistry* CD, bassist Victor Wooten hears God say, "If I only had one son, then tell me who are you?" In the undying spirit of a single child born over two thousand years ago, celebrating his birth calls us to a celebration of ourselves as God's children. Ethicist Emilie Townes' words gives rise to a soul stirring similarity between baptismal and birthing waters. She writes in her book, *In a Blaze of Glory*:⁴

*we are not dipped
we are not sprinkled
we are not immersed
we are washed in the grace of God.*

Descriptive Details

The descriptive details in this passage include:

Sights: A census form, persons registering for the census, a pregnant teenager, a teenager giving birth, a baby wrapped in cloth, a manger, an inn;

Sounds: Persons traveling from one town to another on camels and on foot, screams during child birth, the cries of a baby at birth;and

Textures: The soft cloth used to wrap a baby, sticky straw to build a manger.

III. Resources

- To learn more about "Blue Christmas," visit the following online location: http://www.boston.com/news/local/connecticut/articles/2006/12/19/blue_christmas_church_services_attract_the_depressed_joyless/ accessed 5 September 2008. Pastors and ministers are also encouraged to read more about depression and Seasonal Affective Disorder, also known as winter depression.
- For helpful information related to children's issues visit Defense Fund online location www.childrensdefensefund.org accessed 5 September 2008
- For information related to children of the incarcerated visit Family and Corrections Network online location: www.fcnetwork.org accessed 5 September 2008

Notes

1. Craddock, Fred B. Luke. Interpretation, a Bible commentary for teaching and preaching. Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1990.
2. Thurman, Howard. Meditations of the Heart. New York, NY: Harper, 1953.

3. Wooten, Victor. Palmystery. Cleveland, OH: Heads Up International, 2008.
4. Townes, Emilie Maureen. In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality As Social Witness. Nashville, NY: Abingdon Press, 1995.