

Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV)

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And 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.

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

*Christmas Eve marks the end of Advent and the beginning of Christmas.
Glory to God, the Christ is born!*

My daughter-in-law is less than a month away from delivering her first child, our first grandchild. And Courtney is ready for this pregnancy to end. Not only because of her and Matt’s excitement over the birth of their son, Nathaniel Scott (yes, go ahead and ask me whether I too am excited!), but because she is tired of being pregnant. I can’t remember knowing a woman who wasn’t very ready for the big day when it came, the day invested with the hopes and dreams of many months . . . and a lot of work.

I can hardly imagine Mary’s sense of anticipation. The visit by the angel Gabriel nine months before would have been vividly burned into Mary’s memory. “You will conceive and give birth a son,” Gabriel had told her. “You are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High . . . the Son of God” (Luke 1:31, 35). For nine months, she had guarded her baby and her knowledge of whom she carried. Then, just when it is nearly time for her to give birth, she and Joseph have to make the long trek to Bethlehem¹ for the census.

Mary and Joseph’s hometown was Nazareth, a small village located in the Galilean hill country, almost due west of where the Sea of Galilee empties into the Jordan River. Don’t picture the Galilean “hill country” like the Austin “hill country.” The hills between Nazareth and the Sea of Galilee are much more numerous, very steep, and incredibly rocky.

Bethlehem is located about 5 miles south of Jerusalem and about a 75 mile journey from Nazareth, depending upon the route taken. Regardless of whether Mary and Joseph went due south from Nazareth through the hills to Jerusalem and Bethlehem or went east for a bit so they could come south through the Jordan River valley, it would have been a very difficult trip for Mary. I’m quite sure that by the time they reached Bethlehem she was very much ready to have the baby.

¹Joseph had to go to Bethlehem because he was a descendent of King David. Thus, Bethlehem was his ancestral home. Israel’s Messiah was to come from the house of David. The claim that Jesus was of David’s “house” was based on Joseph being Jesus’ legal, though not biological, father (see Luke’s genealogy of Jesus in Luke 3). You’ll also see that Luke takes Jesus’ genealogy all the way back to Adam, emphasizing that Jesus is savior all humankind, not just of the Jews.

But, of course, the end of Mary's pregnancy meant the beginning of the most remarkable time in human history, the 33 years or so that God walked the earth. It can be a hard thing to accept that the climax of human history was 2,000 years ago, but that's the truth of it. And each year we gather to worship our Lord and celebrate the beginning of those 33 years.

The end or the beginning?

Christians have never been able to do a very good job at *Christianizing* Christmas. In the early centuries of Christianity, Christians didn't try keep Christmas at all. Even when Christians began to try to "take over" the winter festivals they had limited success. Many of our most cherished Christmas traditions never had anything to do with the birth of Jesus Christ. Yule logs, evergreen, feasts, gift-giving and more were all part of these festivals and as Christians created Christmas, they did their best to incorporate them all.

This isn't all bad. Celebrations, families, giving gifts – these are all good things in themselves, but they create an uncomfortable tension with the sacred at Christmas. Lawrence Wood notes that, at times, Christians have nearly managed to kill Christmas in their attempts to Christianize the holiday. The English Puritans pretty well outlawed the holiday, insisting that stores stay open on December 25 and that parliament meet. Keeping Christmas was illegal in the Plymouth Colony. Gratefully, Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* was in part responsible for the restoration of Christmas in the mid-nineteenth century.²

So, Christians' uneasiness with Christmas is nothing new, and the tension is taken to ever new heights with the unending expansion of the commercial holiday. So much so that it increasingly seems like Christmas ends with Christmas Day, rather than beginning with it.

Yet, Christmas marks the transition from preparing for Christ's arrival to celebrating it. We gather on Christmas Eve to celebrate that singular moment when God became flesh. We worship the God who is revealed to us in that tiny, slimey, squirming baby. It doesn't take any special wisdom to see that God is great . . . but a baby born to a peasant family in an out of the way corner of this planet? That, we could never figure out on our own.

The Story of "Silent Night"

In his book, *101 More Hymn Stories*, Kenneth Osbeck tells us the story of this popular carol:

Joseph Mohr was born in the lovely city of Salzburg, Austria, in 1792. As a boy he was an active chorister in the Cathedral of Salzburg. In 1815 Mohr was ordained to the priesthood of the Roman Catholic Church. Following his ordination, he served various parishes in the Salzburg area. It was while serving as an assistant priest in 1818, at the newly erected Church of St. Nicholas in Obernorf in the region of Tyrol, high in the beautiful Alps, that Mohr wrote the text for this favorite of all Christmas carols.

Father Mohr and Franz Gruber, the village schoolmaster and church organist, had often talked about the fact that the perfect Christmas hymn had never been written. With this goal in mind, and after he had received word that his own church organ would not function, Father Mohr decided that he must write his own Christmas hymn, immediately, in order to have music for the special Christmas Eve Mass and to avoid disappointing his faithful congregation. Upon completing the text, he took his words to Franz Gruber, who exclaimed when he saw them, "Friend Mohr, you have found it—the right song—God be praised!"

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In his book, *Christmas: A Candid History*, Bruce Forbes has a simple proposal for putting Christ back in Christmas: keep the twelve days of the Christmas season. On the traditional church calendar, the Season of Christmas begins with Advent and ends on January 6, the day we celebrate the Epiphany of the Lord. In the traditions of the western church, this day marked the arrival of the three wise men bearing gifts who, by doing so, reveal that the baby is Lord and King. What are known as the "twelve days" are those between Dec 25 and Jan 6.

Simple . . . all the trees and lights can go up as early as we like. Santa and the gifts can stay. But beginning on December 25 and for twelve days thereafter, we begin to focus on the birth of Jesus in a way that we can't in the hustle and bustle before the 25th.

You and I aren't going to stop the commercialization of Christmas or even slow it down. But we can begin to build personal and family traditions that incorporate our worship and celebration of the Christ-child into the twelve days of Christmas. Perhaps we can begin to put the Christ back in Christmas.

²From Wood's review in *Christian Century* of Bruce Forbes' new book, *Christmas, A Candid History*.

K. Osbeck's Story of "Silent Night"

(continued from the page two textbox)

Soon Gruber completed his task of writing the right tune for the new text. His simple but beautiful music blended perfectly with the spirit of Father Mohr's words. The hymn was completed in time for the Christmas Eve Mass, and Father Mohr and Franz Gruber sang their hymn to the accompaniment of Gruber's guitar. The hymn made a deep impact upon the parishioners, even as it has on succeeding generations. The passing of time seems only to add to its appeal.

Neither Mohr nor Gruber intended that their hymn would be used outside of their little mountain village area. However, it is reported that within a few days after the Christmas Eve Mass, the organ repairman, Karl Maurachen of Zillerthal, a well-known organ builder of that area, came to the church and obtained a copy of the new hymn. Through his influence the carol spread throughout the entire Tyrol region, where it became popular as a Tyrolean Folk Song. Soon various performing groups such as the well-known Strasser Children's Quartet began using the hymn in concert throughout Austria and Germany. In 1838 it first appeared in a German hymnal, where it was titled a "hymn of unknown origin." It was first heard in the United States in 1839 when a family of Tyrolean Singers, the Rainers, used the music during their concert tour. Soon it was translated into English as well as into other languages. At least eight different English translations are known today. The carol is presently sung in all of the major languages of the world and is a universal favorite wherever songs of the Christmas message are sung.

The translation by John F. Young is the version most widely used in this country. Young was born at Pittston, Kennebec County, Maryland, on October 30, 1820. He was ordained to the Episcopal Church and served a number of years as a bishop in the State of Florida. Throughout his church ministry he had a keen interest in sacred music. This translation of Mohr's German text first appeared in 1863 in Clark Hollister's *Service and Tune Book*. In addition to this translation of this text, Young is also known as the editor of two published hymnals, *Hymns and Music for the Young*, 1861, and *Great Hymns of the Church*, published posthumously by John Henry Hopkins, 1887.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. What are some ways we could keep Christmas beginning December 25 and continuing through January 6, the twelve days of Christmas? What traditions could you and your family begin? Exchanging a single, meaning-filled gift on January 6? Perhaps a special twelve-days calendar for the kids with a brief prayer for each day? How about taking down a few Santa decorations and putting up some Christ-centered decorations for those twelve days? How about a special twelve-days candle? Or a twelfth-night dinner? What are some others ways we could adopt new traditions?
2. I am always drawn to two questions by Luke's story. First, who or what is really Lord of my life? Do I truly admit that Jesus is not only the master of me, but the master of everyone and everything? What does it really mean to confess that Jesus is Savior and Lord . . . in very practical everyday terms? Second, what does it mean (to me!) that God bypassed the powerful and successful at Jesus' birth, choosing instead two very ordinary and inconsequential people? In this birth, God has reversed all my notions of power and importance. How will I reflect this reversal in my own life?

Winter Bible Academy information and registration is now available at www.thebibleacademy.com.

We've got another great class line-up including the enormously popular *Alpha* class on marriage, as well as the *Alpha* introduction to religion and faith. We have a Sunday morning class with Rev. Doug Meyer on holy habits. We're also offering two one-day Saturday workshops: Rev. Michael Reeves will be teaching us *How to Study the Bible* and Laura Zuber will repeat her workshop on spiritual gifts. Scott Engle will be teaching classes on Jesus and on David. Frankey Commer is leading class on Methodism. Bob Pannell's class is on the psalms. Laura Zuber is also leading a daytime class on Jesus' "I Am" sayings. You can see that there is the usual offering of diverse, interesting, and meaningful classes. Childcare will be provided.

Exploring World Religions

Begins Jan 6 at 11am, Festival Hall, in Scott Engle's Sunday class

This series will be an introduction to the major world religions – but with a twist! We'll begin with an introduction to Christianity and then, with humility and respect, we'll look at some of the basics of other religions and see how they differ from Christianity. Our goal will not be to become "experts" in these religions, but to understand our faith better by understanding what Christianity is not. We may even learn how to speak more confidently about our faith to friends and loved ones who are not Christian.