

Bible Studies for Life Series for December 23: Celebrating the Savior's Birth

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Celebrating the Savior's Birth

- Luke 2:1-20

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What a motley crew! Well, motley might not be the best term, but certainly an unexpected crew. The people that God chose to bring the Messiah into the world and the people to whom God first announced his birth were an unlikely lot. Joseph and Mary were an unlikely couple, not even yet married they were chosen for this task. And why in the world would God choose to announce the coming of the Messiah to the shepherds? They rarely made it to town and certainly would not have been considered a group with any influence. But those are the characters of this story and a component of this story that we cannot overlook.

God uses ordinary people in his work and always has. We don't usually compare ourselves to biblical heroes, but James says that, "Elijah was a man just like us." So maybe the fact that the people in this story were

people just like us should matter to us. It is through these people that some of our misconceptions about Christmas can be cleaned up. That was certainly the case with Mary and Joseph. They were planning a wedding, getting ready for the life that they would have together, we know their story, are familiar with it, it is not much different from ours until God intervenes. And when God steps in, everything changes.

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One of the characters in the story that gets quite a bit of negative reaction this time of year is the innkeeper. The story of the innkeeper is largely fictitious, it comes to us from plays we have seen or books that we have read, but the innkeeper is not mentioned in the story at all. The only thing that Luke says is, "...there was no room for them in the inn." One of the misconceptions that we have is that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem the night of Jesus' birth. We have this mental picture of Joseph leading the donkey on which Mary rides late at night, going from door to door trying to find a place for his wife who will give birth any minute. They go through Bethlehem valiantly and vainly searching in the cold night air, led only by the reflection of the moon and the light of the stars. But when we realize that Bethlehem was eighty or ninety miles from Nazareth it becomes questionable that they showed up at the last minute. In fact, Luke states, "While they were there." And Matthew doesn't mention the journey at all. All of it gives the impression that Joseph and Mary had been in Bethlehem for a while.

That shouldn't really surprise us when we consider that Joseph wanted to shield Mary from the shame and scandal of an unexpected pregnancy. We

know that Mary went to visit Elizabeth for three months and it is certainly reasonable to believe that Joseph and Mary were in Bethlehem for quite a while.

Luke says that there was no room for them in the inn. Our usual picture of that is of an early Palestinian version of a Motel Six. But the word used for inn is the same word used to describe the room that Jesus reserved for the Last Supper. The real difficulty did not come in finding a place to stay as much as it did in finding an undisturbed place for the birth of a child. When we take into consideration the fact that Mary would have been ceremonially unclean as well as the room in which she stayed the maybe the innkeeper wasn't so bad after all. I would argue that the hallmarks of the innkeeper were thoughtfulness, kindness and hospitality. It is amazing whom God chooses to use in his work.

The same can be said of the shepherds. No one in Judea would ever have guessed that the angel would have made his proclamation to the shepherds. Sheep weren't only the main source of meat, they were also the main source of fiber for clothing. Large numbers of lambs would be needed for the daily sacrifices at the Temple. In a day without fences and predator control, being a shepherd was more a lifestyle than a job. Not only did the nature of their work take a lot of time, it was one that made them ceremonially unclean. How interesting that ceremonial uncleanness should come up again in the same story. That God would use those ceremonially unclean to tell the Good News makes it even more interesting. It was to those shepherds, unclean and overlooked by their society that God announced the birth of his Son.

Luke records two responses to the birth of Jesus in this section. The first for us to look at is Mary's response, "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." Mary was no different than any other parent, she loved it as much as we do when people brag on our children. But her situation was a little different, she knew who her child was and

who he would be. It had to be a little overwhelming for her and definitely humbling. All that God had done in her life was worth treasuring.

The shepherds response was a little different, they went and told everyone they could find about what they had been told about the child. The praised and glorified God for what he had done and didn't keep any of it a secret. When it comes down to it, the people in the Christmas story were no different from us. Paul says that we have this treasure in jars of clay, it is a treasure that we are to share and make known and not bury. Our response is to be the same as that of Mary and the shepherds, treasuring up all that God is and has done, and sharing the Good News of what God has done in Christ in his world.

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