

Kirby Lawrence Hill  
December 24, 2013  
Isaiah 9:2-7  
Luke 2:1-20

Warner Memorial Presbyterian Church  
Christmas Eve

## A CHILD

One verse. Oh, there is some limited description of the events that led to Mary and Joseph being in Bethlehem. But in Luke's wondrous telling of the nativity section of the gospel account, the actual description of the birth of our Lord Jesus is given only one verse. "And 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." Perhaps Luke didn't know more than that to include. Or perhaps the gospel writer wanted to leave room for our imaginations to roam.

I had the blessed and what I consider a deeply religious experience of seeing both of my children come into this world. That experience has shaped me and left me wondering what it was like for Mary and Joseph when Jesus was born in very different circumstances than the birth of our two babies. Most any parent would think his or her child is very special. Mary had additional reason to think that. An angel had told her that her child would be so of God that he would be called the Son of God. If indeed this was God in the flesh, incarnation had started as an inside job within her. Any first-time parent is a bit overwhelmed by the awesome event of a life coming into being through one's own body. After the birth, Mary must have surely stared into her baby's eyes wondering what all they would eventually see. Indeed, those eyes would over the years see much that was not as it was intended to be. Mary certainly looked at his ears wondering what he would hear. Would it be through his ears or through his heart that he would hear the wisdom and guidance of God's own voice? Of course she would have looked at Jesus' little mouth and felt it as she nourished him at her breast. I don't put much faith in the assertion found in the carol, "Away in a Manger," that "little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." Since Jesus came as a real baby, he cried. Perhaps Mary would wonder how that voice would later proclaim God's good news for humanity. Any parent looks at their child's little fingers and hands. Little could she imagine the healing, feeding, and loving touch that God would bring through those hands! And she would have looked at his feet, wondering where those feet in following God would take her son. She was there for his first breath, and it was probably good that she did not know at that point that she would also be present to see him take his last breath.

Joseph also must have looked on the child with wonder. Could he believe Mary's incredible story about the nature of her pregnancy? Could he trust her? Could he trust in the God whom Mary said was bringing about something special through this baby? Could God work through what had been for him very confusing times? Joseph certainly looked at the baby's face. Every person who had ever lived had been born like this child was and yet was there a uniqueness to this particular birth? The little boy looked very much like his mother. What did the future hold for him? What did this child hold for the future? Could anyone really help humanity see what God wanted for the world? He felt badly that Mary, even if she had been unfaithful to him, had to make the long trip to Bethlehem for the Roman registration in her condition. He felt badly that there weren't better accommodations for Mary and for the birth of the baby. Not having had training as a midwife, Joseph certainly felt relieved that both mother and child had made it through labor and delivery alright. No baby deserved to be born into such a harsh and bitter world. Joseph would do what he could to make sure the child had what he needed, including having someone who would be a caring, protective father to him and he would have to leave the rest up to God.

Did you see the stars tonight when you came in? In a pre-electric light time, it would be easier to see the stars. Shepherds would have been used to looking up at the nighttime sky and yet

something they had never seen before happened in the sky that night Jesus was born. They must have been startled when an angel appeared to tell them good news of great joy for all the people. They had heard birth announcements, but never one like this. Of course, the birth of a child was good news for the parents, but how could it be good news of great joy for all the people? The angel said that the child who had been born was a Savior, the Messiah, the Lord. Then the angel was joined by a whole host of heavenly messengers who with their heavenly voices sang, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors." They assumed the mayor of Bethlehem and various Roman officials had also been informed, but when they followed the angelic instructions to find the child, they were surprised that it was just the mother, the father, and a child who really looked like any other Hebrew child, but this one was lying in a manger, as the angel had said. The next day the shepherds told their family and friends what had happened to them and they heard comments that it had seemed just like another night to them.

I have to admit I've not seen nor heard messengers of heaven that weren't in human skin. And I'm not sure that angels have feelings like we do, however it's hard for me to imagine that the angels could deliver such wonderful news without feeling. What a joy and an honor it must have been to deliver the best tidings ever! For some reason their instructions had been to share the news not with those that human society considered the movers and shakers, but to share the extraordinary news with some ordinary folk and the shepherds fit the bill. They did not want to startle them, but it was startling news: God was on the move. The shepherds would not realize the full significance of what was happening, but the angels understood that as the prophet Isaiah had foretold, the child who had been born would be: "Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace." What that would look like, they knew not, but they were filled with anticipation about where things would go from here.

We gather this night because of the news conveyed in that one verse: "And 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." We gather this night because God would come as one who was as vulnerable as a newborn, because love has to come in that way. We gather this night because the good news of great joy is for all people even those of us almost six thousand miles away and over two thousand years later. Some will not understand that the world is different because of that night. Whether you hear of good news of great joy with feelings of being overwhelmed, confused, filled with awe, filled with joy, or a combination of feelings, the One who is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace has come. As a result, the world is blessedly different this night. Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom God favors! Amen.