

Luke 2:1-14
December 24, 2009 Late Service

Hampton Baptist
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“Finding Sacred in the Ordinary”

Hear the familiar in a new way:

“It happened in those days that a proclamation went out from President Obama that every citizen must register. This was the first registration while Kaine was governor. So everybody went to register, each going to his own hometown. Joseph too went down from the Rappahannock River of Virginia, from the town of Tappahannock to his home on The Peninsula, a place called Phoebus, to register with his fiancée Mary, who by now was heavily pregnant. While they were there, her time came, and she gave birth to her first boy. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a crab pot. There was no room for them at the hotel.

Now there were some watermen in that section who were up late at night tending to their boats. A messenger from the Lord appeared to them, and evidence of the Lord was shining all about them. It nearly scared the life out of them. The messenger said to them, “Don’t be afraid; for listen, I’m bringing you good news of a great joy in which all people will share. Today your deliverer was born in the city of David’s family. He is the Leader. He is the Lord. And here’s a clue for you: you will find the baby wrapped in cloth strips and lying in a crab pot.”

And all of a sudden, there was with the messenger a crowd of angels singing God’s praises and saying, “Glory in the highest to God, and on Earth, peace to mankind, the object of Gods favor.”

Because the Christmas birth narrative is so familiar, I have sought to *gift* you with another translation. My translation is adapted from the Cotton Patch Gospels written by Clarence Jordan, who was *also* from Georgia.

Luke 2:1-14 is so familiar that most every time I begin reading or hearing it, I remember the scene of Linus in the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special* quoting the entire passage. From the familiar King James Version, Linus began his recitation “And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.” On Christmas Eve, folks are expecting to hear the familiar. The excitement of Christmas has been building. Former youth, now college students and adults living out-of-town, view this service as a chance to *reconnect* with people they have not seen since last year. Let’s see if *we* can reconnect with this old friend called the birth narrative from Luke, even though it may be *clothed* differently.

Being registered by the government elicits differing responses. Some folks complete the forms fearfully, thinking that the government is learning too much about them; this generally comes from those who don’t trust the “gubment.” Some participate *willingly* as their patriotic duty. The nay-sayers recall how *inaccurate* the last census was and quickly remind the willing parties who was missed during the last count. The whole *nation* was registered. Such a task necessitated extensive mailings and hirings. Little did the whole nation know that one baby would make more difference than the President who called for the census.

This was the first census taken with Tim Kaine as governor. Luke’s Gospel is big on names. He seeks to establish a point of reference.

The registration required folks to return to their place of ancestral identity, to return to their town of origin. Unknowingly, families were re-united for the birth of the Christ-child. This registration certainly gives new meaning to the phrase “family of origin.”

Enter Joseph who lived in Tappahannock, up on the Rappahannock River. He had to travel to Phoebus, an inconsequential town in Hampton Roads that was just a speck on the map.

Tappahannock and Phoebus are insignificant on the global scale. Those who live in Richmond or Washington, D.C. are probably keenly aware of that fact. Although a quaint village, Tappahannock

seems to be a typical small town. As is Phoebus. Neither boasts of birthing Presidents. But there is *sacred* in the ordinary.

Accompanying Joseph was Mary, the expectant fiancée. Maybe our society has dulled this for us. With the teen-pregnancy epidemic, we may be shielded from the embarrassment of this event. A common carpenter, although having good blood line, now has to take his pregnant fiancée on an 80-mile trip to see the kinfolk down in Phoebus. Wonder if the kinfolk even knew *he* was engaged? Wonder if they knew *she* was expecting? Kinda hard to hide that. We have no record in the Scripture that Jesus ever went back to Bethlehem.

The trip from Tappahannock to Phoebus was difficult under the best of circumstances. But in this scenario, it was the “gubment” making them travel that distance. Joseph was missing carpentry work, and when a carpenter doesn’t work, he doesn’t get paid. Besides, his pregnant fiancée was a spectacle to those who knew him. The trip was difficult.

“While they were there” indicates that it was probably not just an overnight visit. We don’t really know how long they were in Phoebus before Jesus was born. No mention of wandering the streets and being sent away. No mention of an innkeeper. Dr. Luke doesn’t go into any detail about the birth, only that the time “came.” Her forty weeks were complete.

Mary gave birth; she delivered the baby. No Lamaze classes; no epidurals; no private room. Stable or boat-house as the delivery room; Joseph wondering what he could do. How could she be in so much pain? After all, she is giving birth to the Son of God. Shouldn’t God stop the pain? Shouldn’t God allow her the luxury of a *painless* childbirth? We aren’t told if Mary or Joseph had ever *seen* a baby born before Jesus was delivered. This is her *first* one; Joseph’s too. What a wonder to see.

Instead of sanitary items, Mary finds herself in barn-like conditions and then has to wrap the newborn in strips of cloths and place the child in a crab pot. Not a Jenny Lind crib. Not a Christian Dior baby blanket. No Vacancy sign was flashing at the Fullers Hotel on the corner of Mallory and Mellen Streets, so they couldn’t even find decent housing. Maybe the kinfolks didn’t like what they saw.

Births bring a myriad of emotions. Joseph must have felt like a failure. Mary too. Both were trying to do the right thing. Following Obama’s edict to go to Phoebus, even when it was inconvenient, Joseph was being faithful to Mary despite the personal shame of traveling with an unwed pregnant teen. Mary, with nine pages torn from her calendar since the angelic visit, now wondered if this was the way God actually wanted it to happen.

The first to receive the blessed news were poor watermen? Those whose lifestyle and language were considered to be a bit *salty*? *These* were the first to hear the good news that the Messiah had come? Were the watermen even *looking* for him? They had been excluded from “proper” society. They worked hard, trolled all day and were seen as “common” by the religious elite. These watermen worked most Sundays, because there is *always* something to do on the boat.

And then, Poof! A messenger appeared to them. Out of nowhere. Being by the water can be mighty relaxing; it is certainly quiet at night: the sounds of frogs and June bugs eventually subside, and the blackness of night screams deafness. Suddenly, a diversion. It brings fright to the most courageous of watermen. The darkness around them was dispersed by the dazzling glory of God. Scared them to death. Would’ve scared me. If in the darkness of a remote parking lot, I hear an unfamiliar sound, I almost break my neck turning to see what it is.

Because of the fear in their faces, the angel said, “Don’t be afraid.” Easier said than done! When I am frightened, it takes me a while to calm down. “I bring **you** good news of great joy which shall be for **all** the people.” I bring YOU. This inclusive gospel is for the watermen, and also for the people who pollute the bay and others who protect the bay. This gospel is for **all** the people: the Scrooge who declares “Bah, Humbug!” on Christmas; the volunteers who delivered toys and food to the less fortunate; the person who allowed other interests to steal the joy of the season.

To the watermen, the messenger said, “**Your** deliverer is born. He has come for you as your Leader, your Lord.”

In hopes that the watermen would go looking, the messenger baited their hooks with a sign. **You** will find, placing an emphasis on looking. The messenger knew that they were *hungry* for inclusion. In Phoebus, it would not be difficult to find a baby wrapped in cloths lying in a crab pot.

Immediately, the sky above Ft. Monroe filled with a crowd of angels joining the messenger. The black sky, already illumined by the glory of God, found a crowd of angels in front of that backdrop. They sang, “Glory to God in heaven.” They were declaring that all heaven is ecstatic about the event. And even on earth, although it does not know it yet, peace will be granted to humanity. We are *already* in God’s favor. We don’t have to *earn* the gift of incarnation. Watermen didn’t earn it. It was a gift of grace. Humanity, the crown jewel of creation, did not *earn* peace; it was freely given to us.

About this incarnational narrative, Fred Craddock wrote, “The extraordinary points to the ordinary and says, “See, God is among you.”” (Fred Craddock, John Hayes, Carl R. Holladay, Gene Tucker. Preaching Through the Christian Year. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International. 1994. p. 32) We celebrate tonight because of Immanuel, God with us, God among us, God in us. Tonight, we have found Christ in the familiar. But what happened to Caesar Augustus, Bethlehem and Nazareth, the manger, the shepherds? Some might say the story isn’t complete without them. This Christmas Eve, my prayer is that the story will not be complete without *you* and your experience of the Christ-child. Indeed, the sacred *can* be found in the ordinary. Merry Christmas.