

Christmas at Luke's House

Christmas Cantata Meditations

Meditation I "Waiting until Salvation Comes"

This Advent we have been taking a tour of homes – Gospel homes – and we have been asking, “What is this home like at Christmas? How is it decorated? Who is there for the celebration? In other words, where does this “good news of great joy for all people” BEGIN?” With Mark, it begins in the wilderness with John the Baptist – the messenger who prepares the way for Messiah. Matthew’s good news begins with Abraham, to whom God not only promised children in his old age, but also that his children would become a great people who would then be a blessing to the whole human family. And now, having visited Cousin Mark and Uncle Matthew, at last we come to the Christmas story we know best and perhaps love most. Because it is at Luke’s house that we find mother and child in those first wonderful moments of cherishing the miracle of birth. At Luke’s house a heavenly host of angels fill the night sky with wondrous music as shepherds abide in the fields watching their flocks by night. At Luke’s house the young mother ponders everything in her heart. Christmas at Luke’s house is just what we all want most: Hallmark moments filled with beauty and joy and peace.¹

But I’m getting ahead of myself – for like Matthew had an important backstory to tell, so Luke has history to share about Jesus’ birth... history that can be viewed almost like a three-part video. Each part has sort of a time-date stamp on it.² You’ll probably recognize them: First, “In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah” ... Second, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered” ... And finally, “In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee...” and here’s the thing – by giving us these dates, Luke is not only orienting us in time... he is locating us in a world... and THAT world... when seen through the eyes of God... is NOT as it should be. It is a world that had fallen from grace a long, long time before... a world that continued to go its own way, despite God’s best efforts to bring it back... and one way to express this “not-as-it-should-be-ness” is to point to the political reality into which this child was born... with an EMPIRE that overpowers any who would resist its oppression... with RULERS who declare themselves “son of god, savior, and lord.” Into this world, the prophet proclaims, one is coming... and the glory of the true Son of God, Savior, and Lord will be revealed.

Meditation II “In the Stillness of the Night”

Now, at Luke’s house you’re not going to find the “pretty people” ... the ones who dress in fine clothes and live in fine houses and are always at the center of things.

¹ Cynthia M. Campbell, *Christmas in the Four Gospel Homes* (WJK, 2019), p.26.

² N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone* (Louisville, KY: WJK, 2004), p.14

No, Luke's house is filled with folks that the world has passed by – folks who for one reason or another have never known (or have long since forgotten) that they matter to anyone. This is intentional, of course, because for Luke, THEY are the ones who most need to be there... to hear those angels to see this baby... to hold this baby. And I wonder if they did... get to hold the baby?³ As we know, some babies are sequestered for weeks while others get passed around from the get-go. What about the Christ baby? Now, the Bible doesn't say this... but I choose to think that Mary and Joseph were in the latter category - that the shepherds took turns holding this baby... that Mary went around to each one saying, "You want to hold him? It's OK, you can do it." Because something happens when you hold a baby, doesn't it? The first time it can almost scare you to death – they are so small and soft and fragile. They don't do anything – maybe smack their little lips, scrunch their little faces – but you can't take your eyes off a baby. And when you hold a baby, it's hard not to feel good... to have hope.

Well, I imagine the shepherds took turns holding him... and when they did, I imagine that in the radiant beams from his holy face they saw love's pure light: And seeing love's pure light, I imagine they realized - perhaps for the first time in their lives – they realized that God doesn't make mistakes... that they were not EXTRA... not passed by. No, because of this baby they mattered.

Meditation III: "Amazed at the Adoration" Luke 2:33

Very few words have made the long journey from the ancient Hebrew language to the English we speak today, but one of them – a quite lovely one – is the word "jubilee" with its kin "jubilant" and "jubilation."⁴ Originally, the Hebrew word referred to the ram's horn that was sounded to gather the people for big religious festivals... and one of those (according to the Book of Leviticus) was the Year of Jubilee. Leviticus says that every 50 years, the blowing of the ram's horn would announce the Year of Jubilee – during which debts were forgiven, slaves were released back to freedom, and land that had been sold or conquered was restored to its original owners. It was like a God-ordained socio-economic RESET... and you can imagine the raucous delight in such a day – especially for the poor and enslaved and those who had lost their land. Of course, for those at the top, the year of jubilee must have felt sorrowful... but the Bible has this peculiar bias toward those at the bottom... this desire that everyone will have enough, quite apart from who deserves it and who does not. The word "jubilee" passed into English with only the joyful and celebratory meaning – the jubilant are those who are full of jubilation.

Well, earlier we sang one of my favorite carols, "Angels We Have Heard on High," the shepherds are asked: "Why this jubilee? Why your joyous strains prolong? What the gladsome tidings be... which inspire your heavenly song?" It's a fair question.

³ This part of the reflection is inspired by Thomas Are, Jr., *Christmas at Luke's House*, December 16, 2018, Day1.org

⁴ James C. Howell in *Why This Jubilee? Advent Reflections on Songs of the Seasons* (Upper Room Books, 2015) P.58-59

What do those poor nobodies... who never mattered to anyone except to a few bleating sheep - what do they have to sing about... much less to be "jubilant" about? Except that God's jubilee had just been announced... and it was to THEM that Christ came BEFORE he came to anybody else.

Charge

I suppose we can say that Christmas at Luke's house officially ends with the shepherds patting the baby one last time (at least and returning to their fields glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. Once again, we have heard the good news: that despite all the signs to the contrary, God has not forgotten us... God has not forgotten God's world... and especially, God has not abandoned God's most broken and needy people. As we sing "O Come All Ye Faithful," there is one verse that may be unfamiliar to you. And yet, how apropos it is to Christmas at Luke's house.

Verse 2: O see how the shepherds, summoned to this cradle,
now leaving their flocks, draw night with lowly fear.

We too shall thither bend our joyful footsteps.

O Come, let us adore him.

O come, let us adore him.

O come, let us adore him Christ the Lord.