



Ah, Luke's house for Christmas.

It is similar to Matthew's house in a way.

There are definitely Christmas decorations,
but no wise men and no star,
but a lot of little twinkling lights
and a lot of angels.

Angels and their messages

feature heavily in Luke's gospel,

in fact, that's what Luke uses

as his Christmas tree topper; an angel.

You'll probably notice his nativity set
made from olive wood—

with lots of characters and carvings.

What you noticed at Matthew's house

were the people, because he

basically

hosts a family reunion each year.

While Luke also has family members come,

the thing you'll notice at Luke's house

is the *music*.

Lots of music;

there is a musical cadence

to almost everything.

Choral music and blue grass pickin'

soloists,

groups of eager carolers

who yell more than sing...

Luke is just as at home

in a Kairos lessons and carols service

as he is in the sanctuary's choral cantata.

He'd love the Hickory Choral Society concert

as much as he'd love
singing bell ringers at the Valley Hills
Mall.

He'll let anyone do a solo,
no matter if she is off key and flat,
or pitch perfect and operatic.

God gave you a voice,
so, you could sing his praises,
is what Luke would tell you.

When Luke tells his Christmas story,
there is distinct soundtrack.

(and though we sang it beautifully)
It is not like the 3rd verse of,
O Little Town of Bethlehem,
'How silently how silently
the wondrous gift is giv'n...'
Besides Zechariah 9 months,
there isn't much of anything silent
in Luke's story.

It wasn't planned like this,
or maybe the Spirit had a hand
in the fact that we
are at Luke's house for Christmas
on a Sunday when as a whole church,
we are brimming with music.

Elizabeth sings when she hears Mary's voice;
Mary sings while with Elizabeth;
Jews don't just read the scriptures like we do,
they chant them and sing them:
I can imagine Zechariah singing his prophecy
about John the Baptist;
the angels sing out their news
to the whole cosmos
while the shepherds are in the field;
and Simeon and Anna both sing
about Jesus when he is presented at the Temple.

Luke's music fills our season:
we've just sung Hark the Herald Angels
and many of us love
Angels We Have Heard on High.
Ave Maria is a beautiful song
celebrating Gabriel's announcement
to Mary;
we love to sing Luke's songs at this time of year.

I won't lie,
when the satellite radio stations in my car
switched over to Christmas music
a week before Halloween,
I was there for it.
I have been listening to my favorite
Michael W Smith Christmas CD's
—and the one I couldn't find
I downloaded to my phone.
I promise I am a real hit at parties.

Since Luke is the only gospel
to record to the census
and a trip from Galilee in the north
to Bethlehem in the south,
I imagine there was traveling music
as he told the story of Joseph
and a very pregnant Mary
making the trek down south.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J3-m9CZAjFQ> *(just the audio; I will read the first 6 verses of chap 2 while the music plays)*

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.



I like the way
there is a sort unease in that music.
It isn't happy go-lucky travelling music;
there is a thread of apprehension as it plays.
Which is exactly
what it must have felt like
to have to make that trip with Mary,
pregnant with the Messiah.
Women today are told not travel
when they get near the end
of that final trimester
—but Mary didn't have the choice.
I want to stop for a moment and just say,
I am not concerned today
with historical accuracy;
because the theology of what Luke is telling us,
is more important than the historicity
at the moment.

And one thing he is telling us,
is that this was a precarious journey.
Back then I'm sure women
knew not to travel late in their pregnancies
just like we know today.
But Luke is setting the stage
to say in the midst of risk, comes promise;
in the midst of old empire comes new kingdom.
There is much surprise in this story.

I think one other thing you'll notice
about being at Luke's house
—is that he's a little insistent
that we get the story right.
You see, he's told it many, many times
for many, many years;
but in the retelling
it seems the story has changed.

When you go to Luke's house for Christmas,
he wants to make sure
you tell the story correctly.
So, let's start there.

Mary and Joseph have to make a trip to Bethlehem,
with all the other travelers
who would have been making their way
to their ancestral hometowns.
They would not have been alone,
not on the road,
not in the journey
—they were not alone—
physically or spiritually.

And when they arrived,
we shouldn't think that they were turned
away by a mean-spirited
or exasperated *inn owner*.
Like I mentioned the Friday morning 60 AD,
they were traveling to a place

where they had relatives,
and one of the hallmarks of the Jewish faith
is hospitality.

Joseph was a descendent of David,
returning to the City of David.
There's no way someone
wouldn't have offered Joseph
and Mary shelter.¹

Not only that, months before,
Mary had traveled
to see her cousin Elizabeth and Zechariah,
in the hill country of Judea
—the same region as Bethlehem of Judea.

So, both Mary and Joseph
would have had family close enough by
that no one would have ignored or dismissed them!
No woman in Bethlehem or anywhere else
would let another woman
about to give birth,
do it alone and in a barn.

This is why Luke
sets up his nativity scene
inside his house.
He's aware that our modern nativities
have it all wrong.



We've let culture, extra-biblical tradition,
and our Little People Nativity scenes
flood our imaginations
that Mary gave birth alone and outside

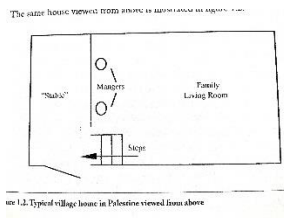
¹ Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (IVP Academic, Downers Grove, IL 2008) pg. 28-29

because the word *manger*
makes us think of the words,
stable and *barn*.

Luke wants the story told correctly.
He sets up his nativity inside his house
as a point of fact.

While that picture
of a cold and lonely birth
adds to the sentiment of the situation,
is isn't the way
Luke meant for his story
to be handed down.
Luke is communicating something
when we hear the story
as he told it.

Kenneth Bailey describes
a simple 1st century Palestinian home
in this way:
they typically had two rooms.

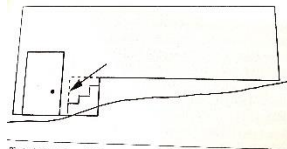


“The main room was a ‘family room’
where the entire family
cooked, ate, slept and lived.

The end of the room next to the door
was either a few feet lower
than the rest of the floor
or blocked off with heavy timbers.”²

² ibid

is shown on a line drawing showing a cross-section from north to upper right in 30°-45°. Figure 2.14 illustrates such a house from the side.



Typical village home in Palestine viewed from the side

ibid p. 2

Each night the family donkey, sheep, cows,
whatever animals they had
were put in that designated area
of the house.

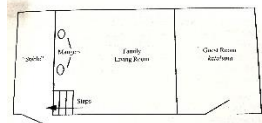
They did this because the animals
were important source of income.

Keeping them in the house also meant
they were less likely to be stolen.

And they also provided
some warmth in winter.

Can you imagine the music
of all the baaing and neighing and snoring each night?
Sometimes I will wake up at night
and think I've heard something either outside or inside
—but the snoring dog
on the end of our bed
assures me that it was nothing.

plan of 'No. 100' The family room is on the left and the guest room is on the right. The area of the house is shown below.



ibid. Typical village home in Palestine with attached guest room

This option for footings was chosen by Alfred Plummer in his 1912

The other room in the home,
“... was exclusively for guests.

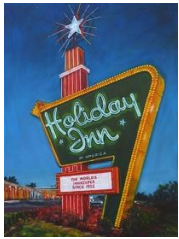
That room could be attached to the end of the house
or be a ‘prophet’s chamber’ on the roof,
as in the story of Elijah (1Kings 17:19) --”³

when he takes the widow’s son to the upper
chamber where he was staying and brings him back to life.

Even meager homes

³ ibid

would have had a space
for a bug and honey eating prophet,
a traveling family member, (even a distant one)
or a wayward nephew
who needed somewhere to stay for a spell;
a traveling vacuum salesman
—no, I'm kidding,
just seeing if you were awake.



The point being,

Luke isn't saying Mary and Joseph
kept running into 'No Vacancy signs.'

Almost every one of our favorite holiday movies,
has it wrong.

The story Luke tells
is that there wasn't space
for them in the guest room.

Here's how we know:

toward the end of Luke,
the disciples ask Jesus
where should we go
to prepare the Passover
—and Jesus tells them,
go into town
and ask the owner of the house,
'where is the guest room
where I may eat the Passover with my disciples,
and he will show you a large upper room

(right, the guest room on the roof).

The word for guest room and upper room
are the same for the "no room" in the inn
at the beginning of Luke's gospel narrative.

And it shouldn't be surprising
that there isn't space or room in the guest room
—everyone was told
to go to their ancestral hometown.
Likely all of Joseph's relatives' houses are full.
So, Mary and Joseph are given
the only shelter available,
a place in the large family room:

“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 (*the guest room*).”



Perhaps it was Luke's intent;
to point out the irony of it all.
That this baby would one day tell us,
here's my body take and eat:
the bread of the life placed in a feeding trough.

That this birth was anything but private.
Luke's gospel is aimed at the Gentiles
—and here is *his* story of Jesus' birth
that took place
not in the privacy of the guest room,
tucked away from the hustle and bustle,
not tucked away from the dangers of empire;
no, this birth which would change the world
took place right in the midst
of everything.
It was visible to everyone.

This birth took place right
in the heart of the home.

The Savior of the world

was born in the midst of adults and children and animals
because there was not space for him,
where there should have been.

And so, Luke story points us to the truth
that even in a world
that can't find space for him,
Jesus will be born among us,
regardless.

And when he is born—
the house erupts in joyous praising
and celebrating

which of course stirs up the animals
so that there's excited hoof stomping
tail wagging and loud braying
which wakes up the neighbors

and then the heavens burst open in a field
just over the hillside
where the armies of God
are singing of everlasting peace.

"How silently, how silently," ...no chance.

I think Christmas at Luke's house sounds more like this:

(Play just audio—Michael W Smith's Gloria 4:18 to the end)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B7GDe5-0x30>