

Luke 2:1-20
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We Belong to One Another

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1 In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph 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. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 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.

8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" 15 When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." 16 So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17 When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18 and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19 But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20 The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

I like to look at flight maps in airline magazines, imagining all of the places that you can go. Sun Country's map is particularly fun. MSP is their hub. So the map gives the impression that our airport is the center from which **all** travel originates--with lines radiating out from here around the country.

That image flashed in my mind when I read "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." I saw lines like arrows arching out of Rome going all over the Empire, carrying the Emperor's command.

Ancient Romans didn't have what we think of as maps. But they didn't need them: everybody knew that the city of Rome WAS the center of the world.

"In those days, a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered."

With a single sentence, Luke evokes the power of the Roman Emperor to set in motion every person in "all the world." A couple of sentences later, Luke has taken us from the center to the remote periphery, to people whom that decree uprooted: Mary and Joseph, traveling 80 miles on foot from Nazareth to Bethlehem (no donkey!).

The spare simplicity of Luke's birth story contrasts with the expansive prose and poetry of that gospel's first chapter, which is filled with conversations, interactions

and descriptive details. There, you recall, Mary was visited by the Archangel Gabriel, who announced God's hope that Mary would agree to bear a son, Jesus. Gabriel foretold:

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.

Turns out that Gabriel's prophesy of the throne, the reign, the kingdom was **not** to be taken literally. If it were, Jesus would have been swaddled in the comfort and safety of a palace. Instead, his cradle was a feeding trough.

And, since the Emperor's decree had forced his parents to leave friends, family, and home, at his birth the "Son of the Most High" was displaced, homeless .

Appropriately, the event **was** heralded by God's angels. But they came only to simple shepherds, not to priests or nobility. The shepherds were functionally homeless themselves--sheltered in limestone caves while they tended their flocks in the fields.

The material poverty surrounding Jesus' birth was essential to the incarnation—the idea that in Jesus, God took on flesh. For God to become human, one of us, God had to become one WITH the poorest of us from the very beginning, from birth.

The improvised setting for Jesus' birth was hardly exceptional at the time. Even today, that is close to the way that most children are born, worldwide.

It's that kind of **commonality** that makes the Incarnation powerful and universal. Ordinary people everywhere can see themselves in the story of Jesus' birth and even in much of his life.

Yes, he had remarkable powers to heal and help others. Yes, Jesus defied human limits in the Resurrection.

Still, while he lived, Jesus was fully human. He worked. He wept. He loved. He lived. He died. And he suffered: the pain of loss, the pain of betrayal, the pain of the lash, the excruciating pain of death by crucifixion.

Taking on flesh in Jesus was God's act of radical compassion with human kind.

Compassion means "empathy" in English. The Latin root for compassion means to "suffer with". Jesus **knew** suffering in the flesh. Everyone from the poorest person to the most privileged can identify with that. The incarnation invites us to trust that through Jesus' suffering, God identifies with us as well.

First and most fundamentally we identify in our flesh with Jesus' birth. We share with him and with every human being the simple fact of being born. Though we don't recall our own birth, the sight of a newborn child, the miracle of living human

flesh in miniature, of perfectly-formed tiny hands and feet, may awaken the memory of pure innocence, of tender vulnerability in our in our own flesh, in our souls.

Jesus, the Christ, was born.

Like you, like me, like every person who has ever lived and every one who ever will. Jesus was born.

Each year at Christmas, celebrating Jesus own nativity, we are invited to identify radically with all of humankind, to celebrate our complete commonality in the one and only race, the human race. We **all** belong to one another.

Mystical unity with one another and with God in Christ is a blessing, and a responsibility. It calls us to whole-hearted compassion with every human being.

In closing, I want to take a moment and ask that you look into the eyes of someone sitting near to you. Gaze deeply in silence for a minute or two.

On this Christmas Eve, embrace the gift that God in Christ has bestowed on each of us: we **all** belong to one another.