

TO THEIR OWN TOWNS

Luke 2:1-7

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on December 24, 2020, Christmas Eve/The Nativity of the Lord. A limited number of people present but otherwise closed for the Coronavirus pandemic, and the service was livestreamed.

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

Two days ago, I had a text exchange with a childhood friend who lives in this neighborhood but whom in the business of adult life I have only seen a dozen or so times since moving here. As the years have passed, a health issue has arisen in her family that led her and her husband to leave the Washington area when COVID hit and spend time with her brother and his wife in a more secluded environment. When I texted her two days ago, I asked how they were doing and if they were back in Alexandria yet. She said: “No. We have stayed here with our family the whole time. We thought it was going to be just for two weeks, but it has lasted a bit longer.” I said: “I had hopes that when we shut the church down it would only be for two weeks as well.” I then added: “Whenever you to come home, you will be amazed how big the new fire station is.”

During this COVID sequestration, my wife and I have taken to walking the neighborhood much more frequently. We have lived in our home for nine years; I’ve worked in this neighborhood sixteen years; but sometimes you have to walk a neighborhood to notice its nuances: additions on homes; landscaping styles; brickwork on walks and patios; different designs on archways overhanging front doors; plus the inevitable flags of favorite colleges unfurled on game day revealing the schools from which the occupants have graduated. We have also noticed that empty nesters have been occupying their time and cash saved from neither commuting nor traveling to do renovations to their homes. Among homes in which children live, fences are going up in front yards to allow more play space; trampolines and bouncy houses appear every block or so; bigger-than-life, inflated, and well-lit characters from Halloween, Thanksgiving or Christmas blow in the breeze, vibrate on cue, even appear ready to talk. When COVID began, one young father took to building a tree house for his children in a giant old oak in the yard; that tree house is about to celebrate its first birthday.

When you walk a neighborhood, you notice its *details*.

I.

In Luke’s story of the birth of Christ, *details* lodge themselves in our memory and language.

Some of the details mark *time*:

“...there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus...”

“...when Cyrenius was governor of Syria ...”

Some mark *place*:

“...went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth...”

“...into Judaea, unto the city of David...”

“... which is called Bethlehem...”

And some details mark the *actual birth* of the Messiah:

“...wrapped him in swaddling clothes...”

“...and laid him in a manger...”

“...because there was no room for them in the inn.”

Such *details* give the story a richness and texture. They bring us into the coldness of night under the brightness of the stars. We can hardly separate the *story* from the *mood* these details create. And it is *mood* to which we look forward every year this day: a mood which brings out the poignancy, the hope, even the bittersweet memories from previous Christmases.

II.

A *detail* that began calling out to me about a month ago in this oddest and in many ways heaviest of Christmastimes is the statement: “All went to their own homes to be registered.”

In a time of *national significance*, the government of the dominant Roman Empire orders all its residents – Roman citizens and Jews living in Rome and subject to its decrees – to travel to the homes in which they *live* to be counted in a census, so the Empire can determine the amount of taxes to levy to keep its roads open, its armies strong, its Emperors wealthy. Living *under* Roman rule but not necessarily *approving* of it, most complied, even if just going along to get along. Jew and Roman alike “went to *their own homes* to be registered.”

Moving from an event of national significance to an event of one family, Luke *then* adds:

And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)

And in this one family, traveling home to be counted in a census instituted by an occupying power, the most significant and intimate of all family events occurs:

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.

This is Luke’s way of presenting, poignantly and poetically, how it was that Jesus Christ – Jesus of *Nazareth* – came to be born in *Bethlehem* even though he was reared in *Nazareth*; and how though he was “conceived by the Holy Spirit” and “born of the Virgin Mary,” he was also of Davidic origin through the line of his earthly father Joseph, which stretched back all the way to David the King.

In a time of national *edict*, not unlike a mobilization for vaccine, Joseph took his family *home*, where his wife gave birth to the savior of the world.

III.

This detail – “all went to their homes” – leads me to say two things in this COVID Christmas.

First, home is nearly always the place to which we are drawn for *matters of significance*. When there is an infant to be born, a crisis to be faced, a major medical treatment to undertake, a final breath to witness or take, nearly all of us are drawn to home. Home is the place to which we travel when first we fall in love, that the one we love may know us better through knowing the place from which we come.

And if, as is often the case, we find ourselves among the many who walk the streets of the city in which we were born and now recognize no one and are recognized by no one; if we are among those who do not have people in our family to whom we are drawn for big decisions, then we turn to those places and people and communities who have become *home* for us, who have become *family*, the *places* in which we are known and loved by people whom we have come to know and love. Often this is a congregation, a church, whom we cannot help but refer to as family, our family, our church family. When important matters lie at hand, it is home to which we journey, wherever home is and whoever constitutes the family who gathers in it.

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Secondly, the details with which Luke describes Joseph’s journey to his home – *And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem* – serves as a reminder that as glorious, as spiritual, as salvific as is the event to which Mary and Joseph travel and in which they are direct participants – the birth of Jesus Christ – that birth is rooted to *earth*. Originating in the beyond, that birth occurs in *history*. At a particular *place* and *time*. Among a particular *people*. In a land of particular *rulers*. An event of heavenly origin, it *occurs* on earth, *redeems* the earth, *transforms* the earth, *saves* the earth. It is in turn *welcomed* on earth, *glorified* on earth, *lived out* on earth, *sung to* and *about* on earth by those who are *drawn* to it, *touched* by it, and *moved to orient* our lives toward it and from it. It is a heavenly event that shapes and molds *who* we are, *how* we live on the earth we all home.

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From time to time I have to remind myself – and therefore feel a need to remind you – that 2020 – the Year of COVID 19 – is still the Year of Our Lord. It is still the *year*, and this is still the *place*, in which we are drawn to and seek to follow the one wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger. And I need not remind you of how hard it has been to navigate the many obstacles to that that desire to follow this year.

Earlier this fall I heard a young philosopher say that in all cultures of human history, if you and I disagree, I can seek to coerce you, I can seek to kill you, I can withdraw from you, or I can seek to persuade you. The attempt to persuade is called ‘politics.’ And politics [he continued] is what human societies do to bring about what they believe is right and good and just and humane. It is what they do to bring about peace.¹

Throughout its long history, certain quarters of the Christian Church – enamored of Empire – have far too quickly embraced the war room; other quarters, repulsed by Empire, have withdrawn to the monastery. As honorable as this latter tradition is, monastic life often ironically joins “empire blessing” quarters of the church in abandoning the place of public debate. Whenever the church has used the tender glory of the birth of our savior to the ends of coercion *or* renunciation, the church has sold its very soul and turned away from God’s good intentions for *its* role in all of creation. When the church stands before the manger, in proper awe and

¹ This is my paraphrase of Luke Bretherton’s opening remarks at “Online Conversation: Christianity and the Case for Democracy,” October 16, 2020, at the Trinity Forum, available at <https://www.tff.org/?portfolio=online-conversation-christianity-and-the-case-for-democracy>.

wonder over the birth of Christ, it cannot help but seek to aid the bringing about of peace, peace on earth, peace among the all the inhabitants of the earth, peace based above all on persuasion.

So in this town to which you have *travelled* – hopefully with safe practices – because it *is* home; in this town in which you have *remained* – safely – because it *is* home; or in the town to which you have travelled which once *was* and still *feels like* home: I hope the glory of this birth will renew within you not the instinct to *kill* or *coerce*, no matter how hidden that instinct is, nor the instinct to *withdraw*, no matter how appealing that instinct feels at this time; but rather, I hope re-living this birth this year will restore within you the instinct to persuade. Persuade those with whom you live. Persuade those with whom you work. Persuade those with whom you share a town, a state, a nation; a family, a home, a pillow. As your way of *bearing witness to* and *joining in* the peace on earth God intends and brings with this birth, please choose persuasion.

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