

Text: Luke 2:1-20
Title: How it Happened
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Maybe it's all those crèches on front lawns and coffee tables.
Maybe it's due to illustrated children's Bibles.
Maybe it's because I never thought it might be any different....

But I always pictured Mary and Joseph arriving at an inn late at night – the sky inky-black, the stars twinkly, and the only light a flickering oil lamp. In my imagination the inn is a square adobe structure with a couple windows and a thatched roof.

Joseph sheepishly knocks on the wood door as Mary winces easing herself down off the donkey. The innkeeper comes to the door in his robe with tousled-hair stuffed up into a night cap. He wants to help, but he looks over his shoulder and with a shake of his head and a shrug, confirms that he just doesn't have any spare rooms.

You get the idea. Maybe you thought the same...

Joseph looks down at his dusty sandals. His shoulders slump. There's a chill in the air. And he's just about to muster up the courage to plead, when the innkeeper brightens with an idea.

You could go out back to the stable. You could build a little fire. The hay is dry and you could sleep on that. It'd be better than trying to travel more – given her condition.

And, Jesus is born in a barn of warm-worn-woods, soft lights, and gently lowing cows. At least that's the way I pictured it given all of those crèches in front yards and on coffee tables....

However! While in Israel I saw that everything was stone – white- sunbaked-broken-hard-scramble-stone. Big boulders and chipped pebbles. Rock-faced cliffs and stone caves. There's tillable soil, but mostly, most everything was rock....

And while in Bethlehem, a Palestinian woman told us that chances are Mary and Joseph showed up at a cave with a structure toward the front where the family ate, slept, and lived, but toward the back of the cave there was a place where the animals were kept – with stone mangers and stone troughs.

Bethlehem is in the West Bank hills. There's a sort of geological-logic to Jesus being born in a stone cave. And quite frankly, the word translated as “inn” can be better translated as “lodging place.” Meaning the place where the people slept. And given that the front of the cave was probably already full of folks who were in town for the census, Joseph and Mary were offered the space in the back where the animals were kept at night....

Jesus was probably born in a cave-dwelling built into the side of a West Bank hill with animals being sheltered from night predators.

I guess how it happened doesn't really make a big difference. But it serves as a reminder that God in Christ is born in a particular place, at a particular time, with the particular idiosyncrasies that make things particular.

As my friend, Father Torey Lightcap writes:

It is, in one sense, a very great scandal that God should choose a little boy – a baby – in some cave somewhere in which to be seen. In a time and in a place to which we can point on a map or a calendar. It's as outrageous as it is sublime. The stink and spittle of animals, the blood of birth, dirt floors, uncertainty, terrible humility.

It is as outrageous as it is sublime.

There is a mystery here beyond imagination and fairy tale. God born as Jesus with the DNA of Mary. God born as Jesus with the DNA of the Holy Spirit. The very breath of divinity coughed out of the lungs of a newborn with a tiny-little-bottom-wrapped-in-cloth, in the back of a cave. God as flesh on stone.

In Bethlehem today, you'd have to navigate military checkpoints, but eventually you'd come to the Church of the Nativity. Tradition places it atop the site where Jesus was born.

And down a skinny-set-of-stairs, in a cramped basement grotto, you'd stoop down to see a 14-pointed silver star set into a marble floor, surrounded by silver lamps, it's the birth site. Then you're nudged forward to another altar marking the site where Mary laid the newborn baby in the manger. The Orthodox Church manages the birth altar; the Catholic Church manages the manger altar....

For almost two thousand years Christians have come to this site believing in, looking for, evidence of the Divine. When I was there it was standing room only as Asians and Ethiopians, Eastern Europeans and Southern Baptists, Brits and Hispanics, Catholics and Pentecostals were all wedged together in the basement hallway, with cameras in hand, hoping to get some sense, some feeling, some hint that God had been there....

And that, dear friends, is part of the wonder of Christmas. We're gathered not because of idea, creed, or confession. We are gathered not just for music and family traditions – no matter how beautiful.

We're gathered together because in a particular place at a particular time God became mass and matter. We're gathered in the faith that God took on cells and cellulose. We're gathered in the mystery that God slipped-in among us.

There is a specific context and specific cast of characters:

The bean-counters conducting a census to expand the tax-rolls for Caesar Augustus, the calloused hands of a confused carpenter, the swollen ankles and sore back of a pregnant woman – traveling ninety miles by donkey, a stone-feeding-trough as a makeshift cradle, gasping for breath in labor, and a mother peering over her belly for a glimpse of the baby. God umbilically tied to a poor Hebrew girl.

Henry Langknecht gets at it this way:

Mary didn't give birth to an avatar or a name or an idea. Mary didn't give birth to a host of representative samples of humanity's diversity. Mary gave birth to one human baby whose annoying specificity warns us and protects us, first from worshipping only our favorite icons, and second from worshipping only the cosmic Christ, the eternal Logos or any other philosophical tag in whose inscrutability we can claim Christmas unity. Jesus already and only looks like Jesus.

The incarnation is a scandal because of its specificity.

God became this and not that.

God took male shape and not female shape.

God as a Hebrew and not a Native American.

God as poor, vulnerable, and tossed aside – not middle class, powerful, safe.

The “annoying specificity” of a God who is not just universal-cosmic-Christ but also God with fingerprints is scandalous. And yet, in the words of Wes Granberg Michaelson:

The God who brought billions of galaxies into being chose to enter into earthly human life as a vulnerable baby. If this is true then every human life is given a point of contact with the Creator. Then the God who brought everything into being is not some remote and distant force far removed from our daily lives. Rather, then this is a God who does the miraculous in order to be with us; and every human life can be impregnated with the divine presence.

“Every human life is given a point of contact with the Creator.”

I like that. Not only is there the specificity of God in Christ but there is the specificity of God and you.

When the angel announces the birth to the shepherds the angel says:

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you...

In Greek the personal pronoun “you” here is plural. It has the sense of “all y’all.” But this plural personal pronoun is also in the dative case.

Now, nothing screams “Merry Christmas” like a little grammar lesson, but....

English doesn't have a dative case but Greek does. The dative case is reserved for things that come directly to another party. The dative would be used when I give a gift to you, or I pull you aside to say something directly to you. The dative is personal in the sense that something is being directed quite specifically your way. The emphasis or exclamation of the dative case is that the action is specific, to you....

So, the announcement of the angel is not a generic all-purpose bulletin. The announcement is personalized. This good news is for you. Listen to the announcement again:

Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all people. Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah. This will be a sign to you...

Bring you...
Born to you...
Sign to you...

The scandal is not the just the “annoying specificity” of God but the “annoying specificity” of you. This good news of great joy is for you.

God for you.
God with you.
God beside you.
God in you.
Each of you.
All of you.

Martin Luther put it as a question:

Of what benefit would it be to me if Jesus would have been born a thousand times and it would have been sung daily in my ears that Jesus Christ was born, but that I was never to hear that Jesus Christ was born for me?

Dear friends, between that which is outrageous and that which is sublime, may you know that God came not as a proposition but as a person, born in a stone cave and nailed to wooden cross, for you. And in that may you know peace – real, tangible, eternal peace. In that may the world know peace – real, tangible, eternal peace.

And no matter how it happened, may that love slip – quietly and unmistakably – into your particular life even on this particular morning.
Amen.