

Devotions for Dec. 26 – Jan 1, 2012

Monday, December 26, 2011: Context Daily reading: Luke 2:1-14

Luke sets Jesus' birth in a political, historical context. He names the emperor and local governor. Luke's readers understand that Luke is not only suggesting that Jesus is the ultimate authority in heaven and on earth; he's contrasting the humble beginnings of Jesus with extravagant Roman leadership. From the start Luke is telling us that Jesus didn't come to be served, but to serve. This point gains clarity as Luke's story continues. The census is an aid to military conscription and taxation. Jewish tradition called citizens to register in their hometowns. Luke notes the census to tell us how Joseph of Nazareth got all the way to Bethlehem, pointing back to Old Testament prophecy. Micah 5:2 tells us that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Ask God for a deeper understanding of how and why Jesus came to be among us, God in human flesh.

Tuesday, December 27, 2011: The Inn Theory Daily reading: Luke 2:7

The "inn theory" of Jesus' birth is likely legend. Bethlehem was a tiny town of around 200 residents. It was not on a Roman road, where almost all ancient inns were located. There is no evidence that an inn existed in Bethlehem at that time. The Middle East had, and still has, a deep tradition of hospitality. It was unthinkable to leave a stranger to sleep in the town square, let alone a pregnant woman. Even if Joseph had no immediate family in Bethlehem, he only had to mention that he was a descendant of David and every home would have been opened to him. The text never says that Mary gave birth in a stable, barn, or cave. The Greek word for inn, or hotel, is "pandocheion." That's the word Luke uses in the story of the Good Samaritan. But it isn't the word he uses in the story of Jesus' birth. Luke uses the word "katalouma," which usually means guest room. That's the meaning given in Luke 22:10-13, the story of the Last Supper. Ask God for a clearer picture of the birth of Christ.

Wednesday, December 28, 2011: More Likely Daily reading: Matthew 1:18-25

Let's tell the story in a more likely way. A good Jew, Joseph sets off for his ancestral home of Bethlehem to register for the census. He doesn't have to take Mary, but he does. Perhaps he's afraid for her safety, doesn't want to be separated from her, doesn't want to miss the birth of this miraculous child. Maybe the Spirit nudges him. They journey for several days, arrive in Bethlehem, connect with townspeople, and are welcomed into a home. The guestroom is already full with other travelers, so Mary and Joseph are welcomed into the main room of the house. Mary gives birth, which usually happened in a home. When Jesus is born, he is placed in one of the feeding troughs. That's a different picture than we typically see depicted in film and art. Ask God for a better understanding of the circumstances surrounding the birth of the Savior of the world.

Thursday, December 29, 2011: Shepherds Daily reading: Luke 2:8-11

Despite the obscurity of Jesus' birth, it doesn't remain a secret for long! Shepherds are the first to hear the good news of the Savior's birth. This continues Luke's theme of God lifting up the poor, outcast and underdog. But Luke is also saying some other important things. The Savior has come for the humble of this world, those who know they haven't got a prayer. It isn't the righteous and religious on the inside who understand. It's those on the outside who respond with faith: a peasant girl, shepherds, Roman centurions, lepers. Jesus is found by and in "the least of these." Jesus is descended from David, who was also a shepherd. Jesus will shepherd his people. If God chooses to work through lowly shepherds, how might God choose to work through you? Ask God to work through you in a new way.

Friday, December 30, 2011: Angels Daily reading: Luke 2:12-14

An angel appears to these shepherds, and the "glory of the Lord" shines around them. Glory is the visible manifestation of divine splendor. In the shepherds' case, it sounds like a brilliant light; it shone around them. In Jesus' day, it was taught that the glory of the Lord dwelled in the Jerusalem temple above the foundation stone located on the floor at the center of the Holy of Holies. This foundation stone was believed to be the stone that Jacob laid his head on at Bethel (Genesis 28), when he saw in a dream the angels of the Lord ascending and descending a ladder from heaven to earth. Catch the significance of Luke's words: with the birth of Jesus, God's glory has left the temple. It is revealed to common people. God has come down to earth. Are there places in your life where you experience a visible manifestation of divine splendor?

Saturday, December 31, 2011: For Us and With Us Daily reading: Luke 2:15-20

A stunning aspect of Luke's Gospel is its insistence that God has a special bent toward those whom society considers "losers." From God's choice of Mary as Jesus' mother, to Bethlehem as the Savior's birthplace, to shepherds as the first to hear and bear witness to the Savior's birth, to the Prince of Peace born in a manger ... it's Luke's way of confessing his belief that the Savior has come for the "losers" of this world. If you don't think you're a loser, then you don't need a Savior and Christmas is not a big deal. But if you know how broken, hopeless and helpless you are, then Christmas announces some of the best news you'll ever hear. God is for us. God is with us. Jesus has come into the world so that we might be born anew as insiders of God's love and life. That will bring light into your darkness, life into your lifelessness, and hope into hopelessness. Ask God to help you see how God is for us and with us.

Sunday, January 1, 2012: Fulfillment Daily reading: Isaiah 9:2-7

There's only a loose connection between this text and Christmas. Aside from Matthew 4:15-16, which quotes 1b-2 to explain why godless Galilee is the starting point for Jesus' public ministry, this text is not quoted in the New Testament in connection to messianic fulfillment. Verses 6-7, which form the heart of Handel's Messiah, has probably done more to connect it with Christmas than anything else! This text is used on Christmas for its theme of light shining in the darkness, of God entering into the darkness of our existence. Ask God to help you see the light of Jesus shining in your darkness.