

A Geography of the Nativity

Christmas Eve 2020

Church of the Ascension

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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. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 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: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!' 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." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. - Luke 2:1-20

All of us know that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. The Nativity Gospel we've just heard beautifully draws our full attention there. But this story also takes us, literally, all over the map.

Notice that a much larger context is already suggested in the very first verse by the mention of 'all the world.' And soon we hear of entire governmental and cultural regions: Galilee, from whence Joseph and Mary came, and Judea, where an emperor's census compelled them to go.

Then story narrows down, to the one town, Bethlehem. Then one street. One property, with a coach house in back, open to the weather. Here we see the most local, granular details of the Nativity. This is no place for human habitation. Even so, a child is born here, in the animals' feeding trough. We can smell the hay, in between the cold wind gusts that blow right through us. But feel, as well, the reassuring softness of the swaddling cloths. Did the new mother think to bring them along? Or did some compassionate local doula assist that night?

Then our perspective expands outward again, initially to *that region*, out there beyond the town, where some shepherds are ... shepherding, and tending the fire, and swapping stories of wolves and of their families and thoughts about the future. The stars have been out for a while. A mist might be forming in the nearby open field.

Suddenly, though, any and all local detail vanishes. The whole cosmos begins to open up as an angel pierces the normalcy of this night. Trailing the angel is *the glory of the Lord*, shining all around. And, after the angel's proclamation and to leave no doubt, here comes the *multitude of the heavenly host*.

Allow me a moment to imagine that this heavenly host sounds something like the Choir of the Ascension at its best!

Then we are back at the town, the street, the unlikely barn, the feed trough, the swaddling cloths. A new and compelling light is cast on ... *everything, everywhere* by the spontaneous visit of the shepherds. They exuberantly report what they have seen and heard.

The perspective widens a final time as the shepherds return from whence they came, "... *glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen ...*" Imagine how their worlds had been altogether enlarged and transformed.

This movement all over the map keeps our attention and makes for a great story. But the author also tells the story in this way to make a theological point, to show us what God is up to here. This vulnerable infant, born in the coach house at Bethlehem is not merely a local human interest story. This child was, is, and will be Lord of all the heavens and of all the earth.

The wide-angle view does not, however, diminish the value or significance of the local story or details or persons. The announcement of the good news of the Savior's birth comes from the heavens, but to whom? It is first proclaimed to some unnamed essential workers on the night shift. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, we will see and be reminded that the message and mission of Jesus is not reserved for the privileged and powerful alone but for all: for those the world deems important, and for those thought to be insignificant; for the confident, and for the frightened; for those adept at and blessed with friendships, and for the socially awkward and lonely; and for you; and for me.

Normally I would wince if you told me that my sermon was all over the map. Now I hope that's the impression I've left here. And before ending, there's one more place I hope you will examine me, a place not found on any usual map, a place I've not yet mentioned. The geography of this Nativity story, as I read it, takes a surprising inward turn near the end, when we hear that "*Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*"

You may recall that Mary also *pondered* this past Sunday, after a greeting by the angel Gabriel, back when all this started. (Luke 1:29b) Here she again turns thoughtfully inward, connecting her inner world with the outer world. Mary surely knew how the terrain of our inner worlds can be every bit as varied and lively and full of surprises and questions as the outer worlds and regions we've traversed in this nativity story.

So, with the shepherds, "*Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.*" As we do so, let us remember that good news from God is always meant to travel, to be shared and heard, to make all the difference in the world for good, all over the map.

With Mary, let us also "*treasure all these words and ponder them ...*" in our hearts. By her example, Mary welcomes us to enter and contemplate any and all realms of our inner terrain.

To be sure, in both outer and inner worlds, there are regions of fear, darkness, monotony or sorrow—all over the map. These may be just the places where Christ will be born tonight. *Amen.*