

Stations of the Nativity

*A Celebration
of the Incarnation*

An offering of St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Mishawaka, Indiana

Advent, Anno Domini MMX

***Thank you to all those who contributed both to
this meditation booklet and the paintings of the stations.
Your work is a generous gift to our beloved parish and a
worthy offering to our Lord.***

"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword..."

Contents

Introduction

1. The Word Became Flesh
2. Gabriel Visits Zechariah
3. The Annunciation
4. Mary Visits Elizabeth
5. The Magnificat
6. John Is Born
7. An Angel Visits Joseph in a Dream
8. The Genealogy of Jesus Christ
9. The Journey to Bethlehem
10. The Nativity
11. The Heavenly Host Praises God
12. Shepherds Visit the Holy Family
13. The Presentation in the Temple
14. The Visit of the Magi

Epilogue: Calling People to Himself

Introduction

Advent. Our culture rushes frantically toward Christmas. Hustling, bustling...no time for rest, no time for quiet...and certainly no space for the Holy. While the rest of the world hurls itself mindlessly toward "the holidays," Christians are called to contemplative walking. The infant Jesus did not suddenly appear without warning...although perhaps to the shepherds it might have seemed that way. There were many signs and wonders which preceded Him. Let us consider them. In order to do so, we must slow our pace to a careful walk. Advent journey – the destination is Bethlehem – but there are many viapoints along the way. Slow down. Take a look. Listen. Breathe. Expect.

Stations of the Nativity is a collaborative effort of artists and writers, members and friends of St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Mishawaka, Indiana. Fashioned after the familiar *Stations of the Cross*, it is a meditative tool designed to prepare our hearts and spirits to receive the Holy One – the Incarnation of Our Lord. This booklet is meant to be used in combination with works of art that hang in the nave of St. Paul's Parish on the banks of the St. Joseph River. However, it may also be used for personal reflection in your home. It is our hope and prayer that in the end, you will know the Lord Jesus as having come...as being here. *O come, let us adore Him, Christ, the Lord.*

The Rev. Susan B. Haynes, Rector
St. Paul's Episcopal Church
Mishawaka, Indiana

Station 1: The Word Became Flesh

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. (John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

John 1:1-18

The Word Made Flesh

"Behold the Son of God
Who creates the world,
Who makes it anew.

Behold the Word of God
Who is the light of desire,
Desire more than you ever knew.

No one has ever seen God,
But this Word, this Light,
Who has, who does,
Will show himself to you,"

A witness declares to many
So many more than a few.

"See the Wisdom of God
In another man's shoes.
See the Wisdom of God
Wash the dirt from your blues."

Writes a witness without fear.

In the darkness of dastardly deeds
Lament the Impish villainy
Thrashing silent the Innocents.

Yet, this Word made flesh
Tissues, sinews, and chest,
Makes a Sabbath of our distress.

There is no chaos with *this* Wisdom
Made flesh. There is no beginning
Without *this* Light,

Life shines in the dark and in the dens,
Starlings, weasels, felines, and friends
Life for all, and all for Life.

Behold the Word of God,
Our life forevermore.
For *this* life is long,
And longs to love,
Ever blessed by God's Holy dove.

Station 2: Gabriel Visits Zechariah

In the days of King Herod of Judea, there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly order of Abijah. His wife was a descendant of Aaron, and her name was Elizabeth. Both of them were righteous before God, living blamelessly according to all the commandments and regulations of the Lord. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren, and both were getting on in years.

Once when he was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense. Now at the time of the incense-offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside. Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him. But the angel said to him, 'Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit. He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.' Zechariah said to the angel, 'How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.' The angel replied, 'I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news. But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.'

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary. When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak. When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.

Luke 1:5-23

Conception: A Song of Zechariah

My words have been dry these many months
And my mouth, lockjawed with a lump
Stuffed up against my Adam's apple
Tight like gauze. I gather a taste from time to time
Of spittle and anesthesia, stuck in my coated throat.

Some divine therapy, but for what?
For disbelief? It is hard to believe in life,
Especially when you have been disappointed
For so long. My job was only to hope for Israel—
Not for myself.

The spices came from Nubia or some other distant land.
I crushed them with mortar and pestle
With all the grief of my people
Until they were fine as ash.
That had been transcendence for me:
Dust rising in the sunlight on a late summer afternoon
Luminescent and soon invisible again.

What did I see beyond the veil?
If I could say, you wouldn't believe me.
Light would not be thick enough;
Air has not the force. Rather, breath
And a slender flame. Then, growing, I saw a figure.
His message seemed to take two minutes,
But when I left the temple evening had come.

I suppose it is like that,
Being in the womb—water and spirit,
Followed by a compression.
I heard no noise I felt no fear
And with my lungs constricted
I lost all power of speech.

He told me that I would no longer need it;
That when John was born, grace would give us other tongues.

Station 3: The Annunciation

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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 for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.' Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.' Then the angel departed from her.

Luke 1:26-35

Meditation

Draped in divine resplendence, the heavenly messenger alights on the virginal chamber. Silence is shattered, and along with it death's dominion over man. For this is no ordinary message; this is no mere "annunciation"—such as that to Zechariah—in which coming events are foretold.

"Then the angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold you will conceive in your womb and bring forth a Son, and shall call His name Jesus'.... Then Mary said, 'Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word.'"

In proclaiming "behold," the most worthy Virgin does not merely respond to Gabriel's word; she humbly submits herself to the transcendent Word, surrendering her body to the glorious mystery of the Incarnation. Indeed, her *fiat*, or "let it be," is like an echo of the divine *fiat* of Genesis, a word that conceives, that brings forth in being uttered. With this word the supreme paradox is generated; as the fifteenth-century Franciscan monk Bernardino of Siena remarks, "Eternity appears in time, immensity in measurement, the Creator in the creature... the unfigurable in the figure, the unnarratable in discourse, the inexplicable in speech, the uncircumscribable in the place, the invisible in vision."

The entire Christian tradition thus hinges on this scene: with Mary's humble obedience, Christ is conceived, and with Christ's descent to earth comes the redemption of original sin and the ultimate salvation of the human race. In the words of Saint Antoninus, a fifteenth-century Archbishop of Florence, the Annunciation opens a time for the end of times, a time through which "death will be destroyed by death and birth repaired by birth."

Let us rejoice without ceasing in this greatest of miracles. And let us, like Mary, surrender to the Word that speaks to us, allowing His Spirit to dwell within us so that we, too, may become servants of His will.

Station 4: Mary Visits Elizabeth

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit and exclaimed with a loud cry, 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.'

Luke 1:39-45

Meditation

When I first read this passage for today's meditation I thought I would be writing about the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth. I thought this would be a commentary on how advent, the time of preparation, is similar to the time women spend preparing for the arrival of their new child. I imagined talking about how Mary and Elizabeth would have talked over their preparations and how they were coming along. However, that changed one morning when I woke up with the following. So I am going to beg your indulgence for a bit. First of all this meditation will be in two parts. For part one, I would like you, the reader, to get to some place you feel comfortable and secure. So pick your favorite chair or room in which you like to relax. Secondly, I would like you to turn off the lights and close your eyes and your ears. Yes, that's right your ears (cotton balls may help you here). I would like you to spend the next few minutes imagining what it would be like to be in a dark secure quiet place. I would then like you to imagine that you are a baby. Yup, a baby. If you need to curl up in to the fetal position to help you along by all means please do so. Okay are you ready? Now close those eyes and ears and stop reading for a few minutes please. When you feel that you have gotten in touch with your inner baby come back and continue to the next part.

Feeling refreshed or quieted or renewed? Good. Part two requires that you read this as if you were the child in Elizabeth's womb speaking these words. So reader, take your time and do not be afraid to start speaking the words out loud.

Quiet..... Alone..... Dark

I am afraid.

I am alone.

But it is warm here.

Quiet..... Alone..... Dark

It's so dark. No light. No Light.

I'm scared.

Shhhh.

I sleep.

Quiet.....Alone.....Dark

I Dream.

Of what do I dream?

I dream of lying on my back on a green grassy hillside. A soft breeze caresses my body. My face turned up to the sun. The warmth of the rays striking my face and my hands. My body drowses in the warmth. I am cocooned in the warmth of the sun. It's peaceful. So peaceful.

Shhh. I sleep. I dream.

I am the rain. Falling. Falling. Falling. Softly. So Softly. I touch..... the petal of a flower.

I renew.

I give it sustenance. The flower rejoices. Can you not hear how it sings? Oh! How it sings.... with Life.

My warmth gives it life.

Shhh. I sleep. I dream.

I am the red leaf of autumn. Torn from my branch. The great tree was my life. But now...

Now I drift.

Carried by the wind. The Wind.

Oh ! The Wind.

It tosses me. It turns me. It pulls me here and there.

And yet it is gentle. Such softness from it. I can feel the harshness and force which it could be. Yet...for me, it is gentle.

Gently it puts me on the ground amongst others who know me not.

I am fragile. I am weak. I am.....

Quiet..... Alone.....Dark. I dream.

I am Fire.

I burn. Burn. BURN.

I am consumed by it. It burns within me. It cries out to me.

I burn away fear! I burn away doubt! I burn away sin! For you and you alone, I burn.

Shhh. I'm sleeping. I'm dreaming.

But no. I am awake. What is this? This light? This great light?

So bright, so bright, so....Bright. So Brilliant! Radiating out. Pouring out. From where?

From where?

I do not know. But... it is he. I am sure of it. It is the One.

It Is HE!

The one for whom I've been waiting! The one of whom I've been dreaming.

The Life-Bringer. The sun. The wind. The rain. The fire.

Yes! It is he who is burning within me. It is he who has the gentleness of the wind. It is he who is brings renewal. It is he who is my warmth. My friend.

No longer am I alone.

No longer am I afraid.

No longer am I dwelling in darkness.

For He has come. Hooray.

HE has come. Hooray!

For me, HE has come. Oh! What joy! What Joy! What JOY!

Hooray. Hooray! HOORAY!

Station 5: The Magnificat

And Mary said,
'My soul magnifies the Lord,
 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
 Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
 and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
 from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
 he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
 and lifted up the lowly;
he has filled the hungry with good things,
 and sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel,
 in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
 to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Luke 1:46-55

Meditation

My soul doth glorify and rejoice, at the appropriate juncture, decently and in order
But more often my soul doth doubt and question, much like the Mary
Who twelve verses prior to Magnificat stops just short of saying
"Gabriel, you cannot be serious. No. Stop it. Really?"

It's good headline, good copy, to snap photo, enlarge quote, double the print run
And devour this unrestrained morsel of praise, passing it round to enlarge circulation
Holy Mary, Mother of God, there she is, getting it right. Doing her saint thing.
So why do all Magnificat melodies haunt me to the bone?

Does Our Lady not specifically declare the great justice and mercy of Mighty One?
And what of His gold stars for good choices, and His Consistency of Follow-Through?
Mighty One—Mary reminds us—is the warm, radiant, ever-present father.
He would not give his child a snake when she asks for a fish, so all is copacetic, yes?

Or has everyone read ahead, and knows, as Mary might have,
That each new breath, every pulse, avails itself to disaster alongside blessing
And each successive "yes" to God, however small, equals some measure of sacrifice
Such that three months in the community of Elizabeth will be necessary, if not critical.

Station 6: John Is Born

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. Her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown his great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her.

On the eighth day they came to circumcise the child, and they were going to name him Zechariah after his father. But his mother said, 'No; he is to be called John.' They said to her, 'None of your relatives has this name.' Then they began motioning to his father to find out what name he wanted to give him. He asked for a writing-tablet and wrote, 'His name is John.' And all of them were amazed. Immediately his mouth was opened and his tongue freed, and he began to speak, praising God. Fear came over all their neighbors, and all these things were talked about throughout the entire hill country of Judea. All who heard them pondered them and said, 'What then will this child become?' For, indeed, the hand of the Lord was with him.

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy:

'Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,

for he has looked favourably on his people and redeemed them.

He has raised up a mighty saviour for us

in the house of his servant David,

as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old,

that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us.

Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,

and has remembered his holy covenant,

the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham,

to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies,

might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness

before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High;

for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways,

to give knowledge of salvation to his people

by the forgiveness of their sins.

By the tender mercy of our God,

the dawn from on high will break upon us,

to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

Poem

Beside himself
With fidgety hands
A father pouts
Left alone
While scurrying pans
Clatter in rooms
For good news
That aggravates
A mouth zipped
Shut

These coming steps
Often sound
Like voices calling
In his head
Or a desert
A single word
He remembers
Like stooping to tie
A shoe (or
Sandal)

To quiet them
He murmuring writes
A name (like "John")
He already knows
Will be snatched
From his hand
In expectation
Of another name
He can only
Sing

Station 7: An Angel Visits Joseph in a Dream

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.' All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.' When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Matthew 1:18-25

Meditation

When we first meet Joseph in the gospel of Matthew, he was, we are told, a man who had made up his mind. We can imagine him seeing Mary, when the truth could no longer be hidden, perhaps taking a moment to speak with her. We can imagine the contrast between these two figures: him, of impeccable family, assured of his place in the world, firm and resolute in his beliefs—perhaps a little too firm, too assured, in being “a righteous man,” as Matthew tells us. And her: so very young, and very wise, and already fiercely, cussedly stubborn, already with the core of her being interwoven with a secret she knew perfectly well this man, good though he was, could not yet conceive. We can imagine him walking away from that interview, perhaps a little bemused at the girl he had decided to divorce, wondering who was the father of the child that she had refused to name. Thinking, perhaps, she seemed like such a nice girl. Thank God I’m well away from that.

Which only goes to show you.

And then came the dream, and the angel, and his words that, like Gabriel to Mary, could overturn a life with the softest of touches, changed everything with a “Peace” or a “Do not be afraid.” When an angel appears to you in a dream, you do not—usually—argue. And now everything was different: the unwed mother in her shame transformed into the conduit of Israel’s salvation, and him, mind changed, now ushered into the beating heart of a mystery, but also knowing full well that to wed Mary meant claiming her, and her pregnancy, and perhaps a few raised eyebrows of his own along the way.

Who is the father of this child? You are.

There is no Annunciation in the gospel of Matthew. In fact, the gospel—and by extension, the entire New Testament—opens with a genealogy, a long list of “begats”: the Genealogy of Christ. And yet, if you look, it is really the genealogy of Joseph, not Mary, and thus not related by blood to Jesus at all. But perhaps, if we listen, Matthew’s gospel—and the pivotal place of Joseph in its opening chapters—should remind us how important it was, not only for the pregnant Mary but also for Christ’s education and later ministry, that he should be taken in, raised, and taught the law (a father’s task, in that time and place) by a “righteous man” who could trace his ancestry through fourteen generations of exiles and fourteen generations of fallible kings, all the way back to David. It was certainly important to Matthew’s first readers, converted Jews themselves, perhaps, looking for the Messiah’s pedigree. But I would like to think that it is more intimate, more personal than that. The angel’s appearance to Joseph in his dream is a call to give over, to give of himself, to give all of himself, no less than the request of Gabriel to Mary. As any adopted child or child with divorced parents will tell you, the people who claim us, love us, and give us a home mark us and shape us no less than the biology which gave us birth. We have such vivid images of Christ and his mother, so many songs, poems, Nativity scenes, and paintings of the Madonna and Child. Let us take a moment and remember Joseph.

Station 8: The Genealogy of Jesus Christ

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar, and Perez the father of Hezron, and Hezron the father of Aram, and Aram the father of Aminadab, and Aminadab the father of Nahshon, and Nahshon the father of Salmon, and Salmon the father of Boaz by Rahab, and Boaz the father of Obed by Ruth, and Obed the father of Jesse, and Jesse the father of King David.

And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah, and Solomon the father of Rehoboam, and Rehoboam the father of Abijah, and Abijah the father of Asaph, and Asaph the father of Jehoshaphat, and Jehoshaphat the father of Joram, and Joram the father of Uzziah, and Uzziah the father of Jotham, and Jotham the father of Ahaz, and Ahaz the father of Hezekiah, and Hezekiah the father of Manasseh, and Manasseh the father of Amos, and Amos the father of Josiah, and Josiah the father of Jechoniah and his brothers, at the time of the deportation to Babylon.

And after the deportation to Babylon: Jechoniah was the father of Salathiel, and Salathiel the father of Zerubbabel, and Zerubbabel the father of Abiud, and Abiud the father of Eliakim, and Eliakim the father of Azor, and Azor the father of Zadok, and Zadok the father of Achim, and Achim the father of Eliud, and Eliud the father of Eleazar, and Eleazar the father of Matthan, and Matthan the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.

So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.

Matthew 1:18-25

Meditation

"Our lives are located in God's narrative."

-Stanley Hauerwas, *Naming the Silences*

Who are all of these people in the 42 generations between Abraham and Jesus? How little we know of their day-to-day lives! What, for example, did Aram do? Who, really, was Jotham? What brought them joy? In what ways did they suffer? What secrets did they hold within their hearts? What did they say when they prayed?

Whatever their individual stories, we can assume this about each of them: none of them realized their role within God's narrative or their place in salvation history. All of them would have been astonished had they known. Whether they were kings or exiles, men or women, people of joy or people of misery, none of them could have realized the ultimate role their lives came to play in God's story, and thus our own. Would they have lived their lives differently had they known? Quite possibly. But it seems that these men and women of the Old Testament were left to live their own lives—rich lives about which we know so little—while still playing an indisputable part in salvation history.

What part will our lives play in God's narrative? Our joys, our sorrows, our sufferings and successes vary from person to person. Much of our lives seem so mundane: we wash dishes, go to work, prepare meals, drive our children to lessons and practices, and care for infirm parents. Yet as the Body of Christ, we live assured that we have been knit into God's plan. How might we live differently if we knew now what part our lives would play? What would our world look like if we all lived fully confident that we are born into a narrative not of our own making?

Station 9: The Journey to Bethlehem

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.

Luke 2:1-5

Meditation

As I read this passage I am particularly struck by verse 3: "And all were proceeding to register for the census, everyone to his own city." (NASB translation)

These days for so many people, it is unusual to have lived in one city long enough to call it their own. We are able to travel long distances in short amounts of time, perhaps living in one place awhile and then moving on, or perhaps adopting as home a city that isn't native to us but which we've come to call our own over time. Myself an obvious example, in the last ten years I've lived semi-permanently in four different cities, not counting the city where I went to college or the places I visited a few months at a time while I studied abroad.

When Caesar calls for the census to be taken, the people under his authority know where to go. They have a clear hometown and family line that makes this census hopefully much simpler and more straightforward than the one the U.S. government took last year in a country of wanderers, job changers, and cross-country movers. And I have to say that I envy Mary and Joseph for their ability to go to their own city. This physical groundedness probably provided some stability in what was fast becoming a series of amazing, unpredictable, and unsettling events in their lives.

Station 10: The Nativity

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.

Luke 2:6-7

Meditation

A few years back, I heard for the first time a recording of one of my very favorite singers of all time—Karen Carpenter—singing a beautiful and simple Christmas song entitled “Christ is Born.” I have researched the lyrics to the song and cannot seem to locate an original author or a country of origin for the text. Aside from Karen (“Christmas Portrait,” 1978), only Perry Como has recorded it, and I do not know anything else about the text. Nevertheless, the humble joy and reverent praise for our long-awaited Messiah moves me whenever I hear it, a joy mingled with profound sadness at the reality of Karen’s far-too-early death in 1983 from complications related to anorexia. As we celebrate the joy of Jesus’ birth, may we remember that the good news of his coming is meant for all people, especially those struggling with the difficulties of life. Prince of Peace, for all the universe—Alleluia, Alleluia!

It is he, Christ who is born today;
Hear him crying in the manger,
King of Heaven, Son of God
Alleluia, Alleluia!

There he lies, there with the lambkin;
Only swaddle for his garment,
With his Holy Mother Mary
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Glory, glory to almighty God
And on earth peace to all men,
Hear the joyful angels singing
Alleluia, Alleluia!

He is born, Let us adore him!
Christ the Lord, King of Kings,
Prince of Peace for all the universe
Alleluia, Alleluia!

Station 11: The Heavenly Host Praises God

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!'

Luke 2:8-14

Meditation

Angels appear to God's people in the Old and New Testaments. God the Creator was kingly power and might, and commoners felt a king's power with foreboding and dread. To face God was to face death, and seeing an angel was a bad omen. To a shepherd, one angel might be bad enough, but a multitude? In the open field?

But when God became a Father his angels brought Good News. Peace! To all of us! God is thinking of us!

And the angels. They weren't summoning a prophet to solemn duty, nor leading a soul from earth to judgment. They got to give the best birth announcement of all time. How could they keep from singing?

The Greeks, from whom we trace our sense of music, spoke of "finding" tunes in the ether. Perhaps their antennae were tuned to the singing of angels. The Christmas angels gave us the *Gloria in Excelsis*, the first sung part of the Mass. Humans are the only species on Earth given the gift of music not for evolution's sake, but solely for expression and beauty. Only the angels and us, created "little less than the angels". As recipients of this gift, we and the angels sing glory to God.

Station 12: Shepherds Visit the Holy Family

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 2:15-20

Meditation

"Good news! Great joy! A Savior is born!" With these words ringing inside their heads, the shepherds hurry toward Bethlehem. Old Asa, knowing he can't keep up, stays back to watch the sheep; he croons to ease their restlessness, and his own pounding heart.

Bethlehem's streets are filled with noisy travelers, who grumble as the shepherds, empowered now by the Angel's message, push through to find the stable. The crowd shoves back at these rough men's presumption. Who do they think they are? What are they about, in such a hurry?

In the stable, Mary lies drained and pale on a bed of straw; the newborn baby lies in the manger beside her. Joseph turns from them in alarm as the shepherds rush in, breathing hard, all talking to Joseph at once: "We saw....the Angels...we heard...the baby...a king!" The parents stare in wonder at the story they tell. Mary is fully awake now.

Then these marginalized men turn and see the baby's tiny head just above Mary's shawl which is swaddling it; they can speak no more, just fall to their knees to worship. God's Kingdom has come, and throughout the land shepherds bear the first witness.

Dear Lord, help us to listen, to see, to believe. Help us to cease judging and denying your witnesses, and to be open to Your Wonder. Amen.

Station 13: The Presentation in the Temple

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,
'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband for seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshipped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem.

Luke 2:22-38

Presented

Taken to the Temple
Shekinah and Sacrifice
Named: "Jesus"
The Lord Saves
Ancient of Days enfleshed, Ancient of Days an infant

Firstborn son presented to Yahweh
Circumcised and marked
Received into the community of faith
Son of Man
Child of Israel, child of Mary

Firstborn over all creation presented to humanity
Sacrifice and Purification
Flesh and blood
Son of God
Eternal Creator, eternal Light

Lifted into Simeon's arms
Spirit-filled man of God
A promise fulfilled
A Savior given
Salvation for his people, salvation for Gentiles

Perceived by Anna
Prophetess and intercessor
Redemption
Payment for transgressions
Restorer of God's image, restorer of shalom

Pure and holy infant
Glory of the Lord
An offering
Gift to the world
Given to save, given to redeem

Station 14: The Visit of the Magi

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

"And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who is to shepherd my people Israel." '

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.' When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy. On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

Matthew 2:1-12

Meditation

They had been watching the stars for years, for decades, maybe for all of their adult lives. Perhaps as they patiently, carefully, painstakingly watched and kept track of the movements of the heavens, they prayed or hoped that they would be fortunate enough that all their long efforts would pay off: that they would see a sign that actually *mattered* – a sign of some great change, of something that would break in upon that sad and groaning world of empires and wars and slaves.

And something that they saw, some conjunction or alignment that they noticed quietly in their observatories, signified something earth-changing to them. They may have known little of the long history of God's love for the Jewish people, of the revelation of Moses or the psalms of David. Yet it is certain that they knew that something of incalculable importance was about to happen.

How do we know this?

Well: why did they come to Bethlehem?

We remember them in a season in which we give and receive presents, so it is all too easy for us to think of the Magi merely as the bearers of gifts. We remember the gold, frankincense, and myrrh much more often than we remember *them*. But if they had simply wanted to send gifts to a new-born child who might eventually become the king—one *more* king!—of some small and backward tributary province of a foreign empire, they could have sent the gifts without going themselves. If they could afford gold, frankincense, and myrrh, then they could also afford the servants who could deliver them.

But they came themselves. Yes, they brought their gifts with them. But then, as anyone who has lived in the Middle East could tell you, you're *supposed* to bring gifts. Not that the gifts don't matter. But the visit is the reason for the gifts; the gifts aren't the reason for the visit. They came, I think, because they wanted to see in person what they had seen in the stars. Like Simeon and Anna, they had a chance to see what they had waited for all their long lives. What wouldn't they give, to see living and breathing (and crying) the child who, as the stars told them, would bring redemption to humanity and victory over the evil that they could see at work in the world?

It is striking that the Magi, who were not even Jews, seem to have understood more about the significance of the Incarnation than Jesus' own disciples did during his life. Jesus' followers could not accept that the Messiah had to suffer and die. Yet the Magi brought not only gold (the symbol of wealth and power) and frankincense (the symbol of wisdom and divinity), but also myrrh, which was used for embalming the dead. And though it took a long time for James or Peter to understand that Jesus had come not only to redeem Israel, but to save the entire world, these outsiders, these foreigners seem to have understood very deeply that Christ's birth would bring a change not only for Jews, but for their own people as well.

If, as seems most likely, the Magi came from Persia, they would have been Zoroastrians – believers in a religion that had long taught that there was one good God, perpetually

fighting against evil. And if they really did see a sign in the skies, then God must have intended to speak to them too – to reward their patience and their dedication. Perhaps, also, their love.

There is a lesson that we should draw from God's willingness to speak to these ancient Persian astronomers: that if we truly seek God, even if we do not fully understand Him—and, after all, who *can* fully understand God?—then He will speak to us in the end in a way that we understand, if we have in our hearts the kind of perseverance and trust that could bring these patient watchers of the stars to a small stable in a backward town in a foreign country, to see what they knew they could not imagine.

Epilogue: Calling People to Himself

Before the incarnate Word ever spoke a mortal word, He was calling people to Himself. And they came. They were not of His chosen people; indeed, they who had been long and bitter enemies of Israel marveled, heeding God's sign in wonder and in hope, while Jerusalem cowered. They had not the Scriptures, the Laws, or the Prophets: they knew not what they sought. Yet leagues of barren, murderous land they traversed, to seek the One who was signified by the sign. Nor did they rest when they had found the king. For they sought the King.

What disappointment, what disillusionment they might have felt had they sought a king after the fashion of men. Who among us, so sure we are of where God should be found, would not have gladly returned to Herod and betrayed the Holy Family to that puppet king? What are they – that insignificant child amidst the straw, the ragged father, the scandalous mother, sleeping squalid with the animals? Surely not what we seek. Surely not those worthy of our kingly gifts!

Learned and wise, they yet knew enough to yield their expectations about whither God might lead when He calls us to Himself. In this, they have obtained their honor: when in the fullness of time all nations shall bow down, they shall be accounted the first. In this, they obtained overwhelming joy.

Would that I be not like Herod, he who, unwilling to relinquish his illusion of mastery even in his waning years, sought the Child in fear and malice cloaked in humility, and could not find Him.

Willing I must become to offer my homage, my gold, my frankincense, my myrrh, though I be led to a King amidst the straw.