

## **Birth of Jesus** **Luke 2:1-20**

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, "Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths 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 and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" When the angels went away from them into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go over to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has made known to us." And they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in a manger. And when they saw it, they made known the saying that had been told them concerning this child. And all who heard it wondered at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured up all these things, pondering them in her heart. And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them. (English Standard Version – ESV)

### **Background:**

- Some scholars dispute whether Quirinius was governor of Syria at this time. He was certainly governor during the later census of 6 AD, but this passage seems to refer to an earlier census, when Herod the Great was still king (before 4 BC); thus, Luke's reference is "first registration."

- Egyptian records show that people had to return to their homes for a tax census, but the home to which they returned was where they owned property, not just where they were born. Therefore, Joseph must have still held property in Bethlehem.

- Betrothal provided most legal rights of marriage, but intercourse was forbidden. Therefore, Joseph is courageous to take his pregnant betrothed with him, even if (as is quite possible) she is also from Bethlehem. Although tax laws in most of the Roman Empire required only the head of a household to appear, the province of Syria also taxed women. Joseph may simply not want to leave Mary alone this late in her pregnancy, especially if the circumstances of her pregnancy had deprived her of other friends.

- The “swaddling clothes” (KJV) were long cloth strips used to keep babies’ limbs straight, so they could grow properly. Midwives normally assisted at birth; therefore, it is likely (although not clear from the text) that a midwife would help Mary, especially since this was her first child. Jewish law allowed midwives to travel long distances, even on the Sabbath, to assist in delivery.
- The word “inn” (*kataluma*) actually means “lodging place” or “guest room” in a private home. Joseph had extended family members living in Bethlehem, so Mary would not have been alone.
- The “manger” (*phatne*) denoted here was a feeding trough for animals, sometimes built in the floor at one end of a home, separate from the living area of residents, including the guest room.
- Due to the proximity to Jerusalem, some scholars have suggested that the flocks noted here are the temple sheep raised for sacrifice. This narrative would have challenged the values of many Jews, who despised shepherds, because their work kept them from participating in the religious activities of their communities. Pasturing flocks at night indicates that this was a warmer season, not winter (when they would graze more in the day); Roman Christians later adopted December 25th as Christmas to supersede Saturnalia, a pagan Roman festival, scheduled at the same time.

### **Questions:**

- + Why does Luke include specific personalities and details concerning the census?
- + What did Joseph risk by taking Mary to Bethlehem? Given the risk, why did he do it?  
Given the same circumstances, what do you think you would have done, and why?
- + How is the traditional Christmas story affected knowing that the “inn” was really a guest room, and that Joseph actually had relatives in Bethlehem to care for Mary before and after delivery?
- + What is significant about the fact that an angel tells shepherds about Jesus before anyone else?  
When did you first hear about Jesus, and from whom? How did you respond at that time?
- + The shepherds responded to what they heard about Jesus by telling others immediately.  
What family member or friend might be receptive to hearing about Jesus from you?