

The Fourth
Week *of* Advent

THE JOURNEY TO
BETHLEHEM

Scripture

Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world should be enrolled. This was the first enrollment, when Quirinius was governor of Syria. So all went to be enrolled, each to his own town. And Joseph too went up from Galilee from the town of Nazareth to Judea, to the city of David that is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, to be enrolled with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. While they were there, the time came for her to have her child, and she gave birth to her firstborn son.

Reading

Bishop Barron

Light from Light

In many ways, the entire Bible is a book of battles. I am not speaking simply of the many military conflicts narrated therein; I am speaking of the almost constant struggle between the ways and purposes of God and those forces that stand opposed to the divine intention. From the opening lines of the Scriptures, we find the Spirit of God drawing life and order from the *tohu wabohu*, the watery chaos. Even in the Garden of Eden, we find the serpent, indeed the cleverest of God's creatures, but also a source of tremendous mischief. In the wake of original sin, Adam and Eve fall into conflict with one another and with the realm of nature. Cain hates his brother and murders him. By the time of Noah, sin had become so pervasive that the *tohu wabohu* returns in the form of an all-destroying flood.

Once established through a series of covenants, the holy people Israel is opposed on every front and from within. The Egyptians enslave Israel; Amalek and Philistia harass it; every power in the Promised Land stands opposed to it; Assyria, Persia, Babylon, Greece, and Rome conquer it. Its most sacred artifacts are destroyed; the temple itself, the dwelling of God on earth, is burned to the ground. And from the inside, Israel is constantly threatened as well: the

sins of her own people, civil war, kingly rivalry, stupidity, resentment, violence, cruelty, the wanton disregard of the commandments of the Lord, the worship of false gods. In his magnificent homilies on the book of Exodus, Origen of Alexandria construes Israel as representative of all of those energies and instincts congruent with the will of God, and the Egyptians as symbolic of all of those forces opposed to God. How tragically telling, he observes, that Egypt has enslaved Israel, meaning that what is best in ourselves and in our societies is often in thrall to what is worst in ourselves and our societies. The Israelite slaves are compelled by their masters to build monuments and fortified cities for their oppressors; indeed, our intelligence, creativity, and energy are dedicated to the building of monuments to and fortifications for our selfishness, violence, and idolatry. Almost invariably, when God's spokespersons and representatives come on the scene, they are met with opposition. Think of the Israelites grumbling against Moses, or of the fierce military opposition faced by Joshua, or of Saul's deep resentment and constant harassment of David, or of the murderous opponents of Jeremiah the prophet, or of the Babylonian invaders who carried the prophet Ezekiel away.

All of this comes to full expression in the New Testament. From the very commencement of his life, Jesus, the one who speaks and acts in the very person of God, is opposed. When we read the familiar Lukan Christmas

account through the right interpretive lenses, we see that it is far from a charming story that one might recite to children. Instead, it is marked, through and through, by the themes of conflict and opposition. The tale opens in the way that one might expect, by invoking great and mighty figures: Quirinius, the Roman governor of Syria, and Caesar Augustus, who effectively ruled the world. But Luke turns our expectations upside down when he makes it clear whom the narrative is about: not Caesar and Quirinius, but two obscure figures making their way to Bethlehem, prompted by Caesar's imperious call for a census of the whole world. The baby to whom the woman is about to give birth is the focus of Luke's attention.

We must read the account, in point of fact, as a contrast between two ideas of kingship. The baby is born in a cave or a stable and placed in a dirty trough where animals eat. The best protected and best fed person in the ancient world would have been Caesar, and such advantages are normally seen as perquisites of the powerful. The baby is wrapped up in swaddling clothes, rendering him utterly incapable of movement. The most mobile and rangy person in the ancient world would have been Caesar Augustus, able to accomplish practically anything he wanted, and such a capacity is normally appreciated as a mark of the good life. Caesar had an enormous army, which is why he was capable of dominating his world. But the baby king, we discover, is the

commander of a *stratias* (army) of angels, and this provides the hermeneutical key to the narrative. True world-conquering power is associated with humility, love, nonviolence, and poverty, not with the qualities valued by a fallen world. The Lukan Christmas story is something like an operatic overture, since it anticipates the central theme that will mark almost every aspect of the coming drama. Two kings, two ideas of kingship, two rival conceptions of power will battle against one another throughout the Gospel, and the *point* of the story is that one of them wins out.

Reflection

Pope Benedict XVI

Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives

For the first time, “all the world” (Luke 2:1), the *ecumēnē* in its entirety, is to be enrolled. For the first time there is a government and an empire that spans the globe. For the first time, there is a great expanse of peace in which everyone’s property can be registered and placed at the service of the wider community. Only now, when there is a commonality of law and property on a large scale, and when a universal language has made it possible for a cultural community to trade in ideas and goods, only now can a message of universal salvation, a universal Savior, enter the world: it is indeed the “fullness of time.” . . .

It was not with the timelessness of myth that Jesus came to be born among us. He belongs to a time that can be precisely dated and a geographical area that is precisely defined: here the universal and the concrete converge. It was in him that the *Lógos*, the creative logic behind all things, entered the world. The eternal *Lógos* became man: the context of place and time is part of this. Faith attaches itself to this concrete reality.

Poem

Gerard Manley Hopkins

“Moonless Darkness”

Moonless darkness stands between.
Past, the Past, no more be seen!
But the Bethlehem-star may lead me
To the sight of Him who freed me
From the self that I have been.
Make me pure, Lord: thou art holy;
Make me meek, Lord: thou wert lowly;
Now beginning, and alway:
Now begin, on Christmas Day.

Hymn

O Magnum Mysterium

Latin

*O magnum mysterium,
et admirabile sacramentum,
ut animalia viderent Dominum natum,
iacentem in praesepio:
Beata Virgo, cuius viscera
meruerunt portare
Dominum Iesum Christum.
Alleluia!*

English

O great mystery,
and wonderful sacrament,
that animals should see the Lord born,
lying in a crib;
O Blessed Virgin, whose womb
was deemed worthy to bear
the Lord Jesus Christ.
Alleluia!

Reflection

St. Thomas Aquinas

Summa theologiae

It is written (Mic. 5:2): “And you, Bethlehem, Ephrata . . . out of you shall he come forth unto me, that is to be the ruler in Israel.” . . .

Christ willed to be born in Bethlehem for two reasons. First, because “he was made . . . of the seed of David according to the flesh,” as it is written (Rom. 1:3); to whom also was a special promise made concerning Christ; according to 2 Samuel 23:1: “The man to whom it was appointed concerning the Christ of the God of Jacob . . . said.” Therefore he willed to be born at Bethlehem, where David was born, in order that by the very birthplace the promise made to David might be shown to be fulfilled. The Evangelist points this out by saying: “Because he was of the house and of the family of David.” Secondly, because, as Gregory says (*Hom. viii in Evang.*): “Bethlehem is interpreted ‘the house of bread.’ It is Christ himself who said, ‘I am the living Bread which came down from heaven.’”

Prayer

Pope Francis

Patris Corde

Hail, Guardian of the Redeemer,
Spouse of the Blessed Virgin Mary.
To you God entrusted his only Son;
in you Mary placed her trust;
with you Christ became man.

Blessed Joseph, to us too,
show yourself a father
and guide us in the path of life.
Obtain for us grace, mercy, and courage,
and defend us from every evil.
Amen.

Poem

G.K. Chesterton

“The House of Christmas”

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;

We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost—how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home.

“He chose both a poor mother,
from whom he was born, and a
poor homeland, about which it is
said, ‘And you, Bethlehem, you are
the least among the tribes
of Judah’ (Mic. 5:2).”

—ORIGEN