

## From Bethlehem to Bedlam

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(LUKE 2:1-7 NRSV) *In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was de-* | *scended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>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.*

After twenty minutes in line I finally made it to the cash register. All the while, I was scolding myself for waiting until the last minute to finish my Christmas shopping—again. I know how crowded it always gets; in fact, crowds and Christmas have become synonymous to me; and I wasn't "doing" crowds very well that year.

When I took out my checkbook, the clerk stopped ringing up the items, and asked, "Do you have your SCCC card?"

"My what?"

"Your Speedy Customer Check Cashing Card."

"No."

"Then you'll need to have your check 'okayed' at the manager's desk,"

Had it not been so late on Christmas Eve, and had I really thought it would have been less crowded at any other store, I'd have left in protest. But I was trapped. So, a supervisor was paged, the cash register was cleared and I was off to the manager's desk, losing my place in line, and joining another twenty-minute line.

Finally, I made it to the desk, and presented my check for "approval." The woman behind the desk said: "I need to see a driver's license and two other forms of identification."

I fumbled in my wallet until I found my driver's license, and asked, "What other kinds of identification do you want?"

"Do you have any credit cards?"

"Yes, and I have my dental records and blood donor card, if that will help!"

"I'm sorry, sir;" she said, patiently. "I'm just doing my job."

I knew it wasn't her fault. Finally, with my "okayed" check in-hand, still smarting from guilt, frustration, and weariness, I got into yet another twenty-minute line, thinking, "At least Christmas comes only once a year!"

We really get into the busy-ness of Christmas preparation: the traffic, the crowds, the family activities, the parties, the shopping, the wrapping, the cooking,

the programs, the concerts—until many of us reach that same low point: "At least Christmas comes only once a year!" We may even add, "Bah! Humbug!" *The Bedlam of Christmas preparation threatens to destroy the Bethlehem Christmas Spirit.*

Christmas is about the greatest news possible. It's a time for celebrating; and Advent is a time—in the church—to prepare for that celebration. The way we approach his birth in Bethlehem affects the bedlam of our lives all year long.

This morning, I want to explore two "Images of Advent"; one is Luke's image of *Bethlehem*; and the other is the *bedlam* of our Christmas preparation. Bethlehem and Bedlam; is there a connection? Believe it or not, there is.

There's an interesting story about a convent built in London around 1250. It was called "St. Mary of Bethlehem." By the end of the century it had become a hospital, and by 1350 it had become a house for the insane. Back then there was no care for the insane; they just locked them up and shoved food under the door twice a day. The noise and confusion of that place was known throughout all England. Over the years, the original name, "St. Mary of Bethlehem" was shortened to "Bethlehem", and "Bethlehem", by corruption, became "Bedlam." The mother of the word, bedlam, is Bethlehem; and its father is the screams of mental and emotional torment.

Bethlehem and bedlam were also related at Jesus' birth. You know the story: a crowded, dusty city—vendors hawking their wares in the chaos, Roman soldiers everywhere; an overcrowded inn—people sleeping on floors and streets; a stable near the inn—barnyard smells and sounds, a birthing among animals... Bedlam. And it didn't end with Jesus' birth. There was uproar and sudden death just a short time later when Herod's soldiers murdered all boy babies under the age of two, and "*A voice was heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her babies and refusing to be consoled, because they are no more.*" (MATTHEW 2:18) Bedlam.

And they're connected today. Here's one person's idea of today's Christmas preparation:

*"...the merchant's bonanza, and the shop clerk's despair; a time when liquor sales soar; six hundred citizens will be killed on the highways, and someone will receive a perfume called "My Sin" on the birthday of He who came to save us from Sin. The streets will be illuminated with lights that are gaudy rather than godly; and skillful advertising will entice too many of us into financial debt. Christmas is wild confusion; and Advent is organized chaos. It is exhaustion coupled with bad temper, bewilderment tempered with good intentions."<sup>1</sup>*

The scriptures remind us that Bethlehem was always set in Bedlam. "O Little

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<sup>1</sup> From a sermon by the late James T. Cleland, Dean of Chapel at Duke University, 1949-73.

Town of Bethlehem" is more than candles, carols, shepherds, stars and sentimentality; and it certainly is more than crowded malls, depression, suicide, and merchandizing. The images of scripture remind us that Jesus was born, not only in Bethlehem, but *also* in Bedlam! While the two are not identical, neither can they be separated.

But in the midst of the bedlam of Caesar's census, in the midst of the bedlam that was Bethlehem to Mary and Joseph, there came, for them:

One quiet moment in the star-clustered night;  
Two weary travelers knew an end was in sight;  
So the soon-to-be mother grasped her husband's strong hand  
And paused to remember where their journey began.  
Nine months of yearning filled with joy and with pain.  
He almost had left her, but then chose to remain  
Close to the woman he had not even kissed,  
Who would bear him a son that would never be his.  
They dreamed of the times they would spend with their son  
Taking trips through the hillsides and watching him run  
And some days the fingers that had fashioned the stars  
Would reach out to hold them when the walk was too far.  
They wrestled with knowing that his life would bring change  
Their friends would grow distant, and shun them as strange  
Though they tried not to think it, in their hearts they were sure  
That their baby was destined to die for the world.

And in one quiet moment a woman and man  
Accepted the part they would have in God's plan  
To give up His glory and be born as a man  
In one quiet moment.

In one quiet moment, they could suddenly hear  
Thousands of angels singing so clear  
"Glory to God! His salvation is near"  
In this one quiet moment.<sup>2</sup>

That's why we have Advent: to help us find "one quiet moment" in the midst of the Bedlam, so that Bedlam doesn't bring us to despair. The text from John's Gospel is clear: God became flesh—pitched His tent among us—here, in Bedlam. It's both the strength and the weakness of the Christian faith that it's interwoven with society—that we live simultaneously in two worlds: the society of our own time, *and* the eternal

<sup>2</sup> Written by Bob Kauflin, recorded by GLAD, 2009.

Kingdom of God. Bethlehem and Bedlam are always in a state of tension; always adjusting.

Christmas is about the fulfillment of promises! One such promise defines the spirit of Advent. It's in the opening verses of the fourth Gospel: *"The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."*(JOHN 1:5 NRSV).

Christ didn't come to take away the darkness—the Bedlam. The darkness and the bedlam are human creations—the consequences of humans trying to do things our way in defiance of the way of abundant living God laid out for us. The light shines in the midst of the darkness. Peace is a choice, given to us in the midst of bedlam.

Somehow, no matter how bedraggled we are after weeks of crowds and shopping malls and overeating and overspending and going home late after Christmas Eve parties to finish wrapping and stuffing and assembling—small hands dragging us out of bed on Christmas morning after far too little sleep—spending all morning cooking and all afternoon washing dishes—kids bouncing off the walls, hyperactive from Christmas stocking candy... Somehow, no matter how frayed and spent and bedraggled, in some "quiet moment" the gift of peace can be claimed when we remember the "real meaning of Christmas". *"The light still shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it!"*

And it's really not all that surprising; after all, from Bethlehem to Bedlam, and back, the "real" meaning of Christmas still is "Emmanuel": God really *is* with us.

May the Peace of God be with us all.

## **Communion Meditation**

There is a story of a King who wanted a painting of peace. Many artists brought paintings of peaceful scenes, but the king couldn't find one that spoke of peace. One painting was a mountain lake with a mirror surface. Everyone thought the king would select this painting to represent peace. The last painting, however, was a mountain scene, with the clouds and wind pounding rain down, and a waterfall boiling off the side of the mountain. Almost hidden behind the waterfall was a nest with a bird tending her eggs. Sitting on the nest, her wings protecting the eggs, her eyes closed, she was at peace. This painting is the one the man selected. Not because it was tranquil, but because the bird had found peace in the middle of the storm.

In John 14:27, Jesus told us, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid."

Whatever happens in life, when Jesus is involved, we can be centered in his peace.

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