

Christmas Eve 2016
The National Presbyterian Church

“Just the right Gift”

Luke 2:1-8; John 1:1-14

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Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus
that all the world should be registered.

²This was the first registration and was taken
while Quirinius was governor of Syria.

³All went to their own towns to be registered.

⁴Joseph 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.

⁵He went to be registered with Mary,

to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child.

⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.

⁷And 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.

John 1:9-14

⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰He was in the world, and the world came into being through him;
yet the world did not know him.

¹¹He came to what was his own,

and his own people did not accept him.

¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name,
he gave power to become children of God,

¹³who were born not of blood

or of the will of the flesh

or of the will of man,

but of God.

¹⁴And 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.

This evening, I want to share a story, a true story, about an unforgettable Christmas Eve in India. Beatrice Stevenson tells the story. She's the wife of a surgeon who was working at the Miraj Medical center in the west of India at the time, and she shares her experience like this (Presbyterian Survey, Dec. 1992, pp. 10-12):

I was far from home and children that year. My husband was a visiting surgeon at the Miraj Medical Center in the west of India, where I witnessed *the most unusual* Christmas pageant I've ever seen.

This was my first taste of India, and I'd found it all quite fascinating: the temple festivals, women in their colorful saris, narrow village streets, chaotically crowded with log-jams of people, boats, bullock carts, bikes, and honking busses.

And, then, suddenly, my world was changed: I became a patient in the very hospital where my husband was working. And in my pain and weakness, all the glamour went out of my visit. I found it difficult to feel any joy or meaning in the Christmas season. "How," I thought miserably, "*can I ever celebrate Christmas in this alien place?*"

As the sun went down on Christmas Eve, however, I suddenly realized that something was going on, in the courtyard outside my room. Carpenters and electricians were putting final touches on a large outdoor stage. And the courtyard was beginning to be packed with curious townsfolk, sitting cross-legged on the ground, the buzz of their talk rising in an increasing crescendo – like a hive of swarming bees. And in the foreground squatted hundreds of noisy, restless kids.

Then suddenly, the miracle began. As the stage lights flashed on, an expectant hush fell on the waiting crowd. From the street came the clatter of hooves and a *shaggy donkey* appeared out of the night, a *drooping Mary* on its back. *Those that followed* were thwacking away busily on the donkey's rump and uttering salty admonitions to keep Mary and Joseph moving. On the stage, a frantic inn keeper drove them away from his inn. Nearby, some ragged goat herds warmed their hands at a small fire while real goats and kids milled, bleating among them.

Suddenly there was a burst of music from many angels, singing Christmas carols from raised platforms above the stage and from the second floor balcony surrounding it. Spotlights picked out a rustic grotto where a real baby (borrowed from the maternity ward) lay in a straw-filled trough.

The Magi entered resplendent in satin robes of crimson, gold, and royal purple! Surrounded by goat herds, they knelt to offer their precious gifts to the baby. While Mary, her blue sari, framing her sweet, young face, bent over the baby in wondering devotion. And Mary's husband, Joseph stood close by, caring and protective.

It was a lovely tableau, and I was strangely moved by it. What had happened before my eyes *was so real* that it almost seemed that the little Lord Jesus had been born anew. I'd never felt this way about other Christmas pageants. *But there was more to come.*

We were suddenly electrified by the anguished cries of the angels *as the enormous shadow of a cross [the sign of death coming in its way to the baby in the manger] was thrown on a wall above the manger scene.*

- *“What is this?” an angel cried in horror! “Is this to be the fate of this innocent baby?”*
- *“Who would do this dreadful thing to the little Lord of Heaven,” another angel wailed, ringing her hands.*
- *And a chorus of angels cried out, “Who will help him?”*

I watched in suspense, as a band of soldiers with guns and truncheons marched across the stage. Their leader, pausing at the manger, said contemptuously, *“What can a helpless baby do? The only power in this world comes from the mouth of a gun.”*

Next, a ragged beggar hobbled up, leaning on a crutch, his feet bandaged, and a begging bowl in his hand. *“Little One,” he said to the baby, “What good am I to you? I’m only a beggar, and I’m faint with hunger and wretched with pain. I cannot help you and neither can you help me, for this sad life is my fate, my karma.”*

Then across the stage came a gaunt young mother with a baby on her hip and two small children clinging to her sari. *“I’m so harassed by these children that I can’t think of anything else,” she explained to Mary. “Maybe later, when they’re older, I can come back.”*

A bearded guru came by next, a pile of sacred books under his arms. *“I worship many gods,” he said haughtily to the baby. “If you want to be one of them, you may; I don’t mind. I’m very broad minded. But to follow you only? How ridiculous. I need a god for every occasion. One simply will not do.”*

At this point, the angels who had covered their eyes with shame at the sacrilege, cried out to the audience,

“Is there no one here who will give allegiance to the King of Heaven? God’s very Son has come to help us. Does this mean nothing to you?”

The audience stirred uneasily, troubled by this appeal.

Suddenly, there was a fresh craning of necks as a smiling young woman in white sari and nurse’s cap mounted the stage and knelt before the manger. *“Gladly will I serve you, O Lord my King!” she exclaimed. Then turning to the startled crowd she said, “I come from the southernmost state of Kerala. And there we have followed the Christ for almost 2,000 years -- ever since his disciple, Saint Thomas, came to India to tell us the good news -- that we can become sons and daughters of Almighty God. For me, as a girl, this has meant growing up in a loving Christian family, where I was just as important as my brothers; where I, too, had schooling; and where, instead of being married off, I was allowed to choose my own career and my own husband.”*

Next, a working man with a garden hoe in hand came forward. Also kneeling by the manger, he cried out, *“Oh, Lord, my Savior. I owe you everything - my life, my*

health, my new standing in this Christian community. Gladly will I serve you all the days of my life.”

Then turning to the audience, he explained, *“I once had leprosy. I was an outcast, doomed to a life of begging until I heard about this Christian hospital. Here, doctors cured my leprosy and operated on my useless, claw-like hands - -- “Look!!” he held his hoe aloft, “now my fingers can bend and hold things again. At last I’m useful. I have worth.”*

Finally, a dignified older man in a surgeon’s cap and gown approached the manger, prostrated himself before its baby, then turned to the audience to say, *“You know me well, my friends. I am Dr. Chopade, a surgeon here at Miraj Medical Center, and I’ve cared for many of you over the past 20 years. But what you may not know is that I was an Untouchable.”*

A startled murmur swept through the crowd, but his kind voice continued, *“Yes, according to your law, I was unholy - a non-person, not created by the gods as you are. As a boy, I lived in a segregated part of our village. My widowed mother cleaned latrines for a living, and I rummaged through the village garbage, competing with dogs for something to satisfy our hunger. But I wanted to be someone. Especially, I wanted to be a doctor like the ones I’d seen from the Mission Hospital, who tended the sick in our village. So I would sit as close to the school as I dared, and listened to the teacher’s lessons. He often cursed me, and the children would chase me away with stones.”*

Approving catcalls came from the audience.

“But each day, I’d be back. Then I learned something wonderful. There were missionaries from across the sea who actually wanted to help Untouchables. And with their help, I graduated from college and medical school. And here I am.”

For a long moment he gazed out over the crowd, his dark eyes tender and pleading. Then turning back to the manger, he pressed his palms together in the classic Indian greeting -- and murmured, *“Thank you. Thank you, Lord Jesus.”*

From the angels above the stage and the surrounding balconies floated a final song, *‘Silent Night, Holy Night, Christ the Savior is Born’*. For a moment, the audience sat transfixed. Then in complete silence, arose and moved away to their dark streets and homes

[DR: . . . surely wondering if the story they heard and the changes it had made in the lives of those who had spoken could really be true - true in general; and true for them, in particular.]

When the Bible, tells the Christmas Story, like the pageant in Miraj, *it very deliberately sets the scene* in the context of the history of the day, in the context of historical figures whose lives we know about from historical records outside the Bible.

The birth took place, the Bible says, “in the days of Caesar Augustus,” the first Roman Emperor, and “in the days when Quirinius was governor in Syria.”

These are not just throw away comments of general interest, but deliberate statements that have a purpose. It's as if the Bible is saying, first of all, that the story of Jesus' birth is no mere myth or fairy tale, not merely a children's story- one among many others that we pull out once a year.

To be sure: it IS a great story for children. *But it's also* a story for adults as well! Like the *adults* taking their place in the crowd and in the pageant alongside the children that evening in courtyard of the mission hospital in Miraj. It's a story about something that really happened that would change the course of history.

To most people in the world, it's the great and famous political figures – like Augustus and Quirinius – who wield the power and change the course of history. And, to be sure – they do. But in telling the story of Jesus' birth, and in mentioning these great leaders, what the Bible is saying that

If we focus all our energy, all our hopes and our fears, and our anxieties, on the politicians and leaders of our day, as if they held ultimate power and control, then we're getting things out of order. The Real King – absurd as it may seem – the One with even more power and influence, is the one in the manger!

That's what the Bible (what God) wants us to see. But not only that.

In mentioning these historical figures (Caesar Augustus and Quirinius) what God wants us to know as well, is that *the story of Jesus' birth – is a story about God's action, God's interest, and God's entrance into the same kind of world that you and I live in today.*

Time and history, of course, change many things – but some things *never change*. The time, when Jesus was born, for example, *the time of Augustus and Quirinius* was a time when the world was going through a period of dramatic change and uncertainty just as our world is doing right now!

- *This was a time when some people were rejoicing at the peace that Augustus and the powerful Romans would bring to Mediterranean world (the Pax Romana as it was called)*

In fact, in the years to come this was a peace that God would use for his purposes - to spread the story of Jesus across the ancient world! Without that peace to travel in the first two centuries AD, the good news of Jesus may never have left the tiny land of Judea and Palestine

So some people were rejoicing at the impact of this moment in time! But not everyone!

- *For some -- this period was not a time for joy but a time for lament and sadness! What filled the minds of these people was that the same Roman power that promised peace to the world would almost certainly bring with it the crushing of individual liberty – Any hope of civil rights and religious freedom*

[Which had been won for the Jews by Judas Maccabee on the first Hannukah, 150 years, before and which lies at the base of so much of our western society]

was disappearing fast! So that if you messed with the power of Rome, *with the Augustuses and Quiriniuses* of the day, if you dared to resist the opinion of the emperor – well, *you could get crucified* (as someone we know, actually did).

So the Bible sets the story of the first Christmas in the context of real history: A story not just for children, but for adults, too, about life – with all its hopes and fears and tensions, and with all its questions about

- who has the power to do good or evil, with our lives and with our society
- and how we are to live in times of rapid and often confusing change

And so in a remarkable way the drama that Beatrice Stevenson watched in Miraj from her hospital room on the Christmas Eve gets it right!

What she saw and heard was a remarkable blend of the ancient and the modern; of the intersection of lives from the past, with real lives in the present

- Mary and Joseph and the donkey
- and the shepherds
- and the wise men

alongside the stories of

- The soldier, and guns,
- and the poverty of the beggar,
- and the harriedness of the mother,
- and the arrogance of the educated philosopher

and then the lives of those who had found their lives radically transformed by Jesus Christ:

- the gardener who'd been crushed by a debilitating disease
- and the nurse whose parents could have treated her as of little value just because she was a girl
- and the doctor who was an untouchable but who wouldn't take no for an answer

Real people, real adults living in a real world and needing God's power above all other powers for their lives to be made whole and healthy and fruitful and for their lives to be healed,

And finding that the same Jesus – the Son of God – who entered our world in real history, long ago still comes into our real world, your personal history, today; indeed, into the very down-to-earth fabric of our lives, to meet us in our need.

In my pain and weakness, [Beatrice Stevenson writes] I found it difficult to feel any joy or meaning in the Christmas season. "How," I thought miserably, "*can I ever celebrate Christmas in this alien place?*"

Then suddenly the miracle began. What had happened before my eyes *was so real* that it almost seemed that the little Lord Jesus had been born anew: I'd never felt this way about any other Christmas pageant. *But there was more to come.*

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At this point, the angels who had covered their eyes with shame at the sacrilege, cried out to the audience, "*Is there no one here who will give allegiance to the King of Heaven? God's very Son has come to help us.*"

Just the right gift. At the right time. For each of us.
Given at a particular moment in real history.
For people who live at any and every particular moment in history.
For people like you and me

Tonight: Give him your allegiance too. And watch his power at work

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