

Lesson Two

1. Line from O Holy Night

- *A thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices...*

2. Scriptural approach

- The birth story of Jesus is found in Matthew's Luke's gospels, in Chapters 1 and 2. Christmas carols, like O Holy Night, tend to paint a very serene, quiet, peaceful picture of life in Israel in the First Century AD. Reality was very different.
- Israel was under the thumb of the Roman Empire, ruled by local tyrants like King Herod. Taxes were high, people worked hard for a living, there was no modern science to fight disease.
- In the year Jesus was born we are told that Caesar decided to take a census of the entire Roman Empire by ordering all people to return to their city of birth in order to register. Can you even begin to imagine the mass migrations that had to occur in order to accomplish this? Homes left, businesses closed, families uprooted.
- Mary and Joseph were no exception. Living in Nazareth at the time when the census call went out, they would have to travel to Joseph's home town of Bethlehem, some 70 miles away. Transportation was limited to walking, riding domesticated donkeys or camels or by cart. In any case, it was going to take several days to get there, an unknown number of days to wait for your turn to register and then the trip back home. Count on probably two weeks at best to accomplish this.
- On top of that, Mary was already pregnant with Jesus. In fact, in her ninth month so the birth would happen soon. When they arrived in Bethlehem they discovered, probably much like everyone was experiencing, that the local inns and homes were already filled with travelers. As the story tells us, they found one inn keeper who offered them room in a stable, with the animals, as a place to stay.
- And while they were there, Jesus was born. Born in a stable, in a small area of a small town without any fanfare or attention. Noticed by a few shepherds, the inn keeper's family and maybe a few other curious guests.
- So, when they song lyric tells us that Jesus' birth was "*...a thrill of hope, the weary world rejoices...*", that was not historically accurate. This event went by almost unnoticed. No bulk mailouts announced the birth of the Messiah, no social media, no media coverage.
- The thrill of hope was experienced by Mary and Joseph. The rejoicing was done by a handful of shepherds and a multitude of angels. But no one else even noticed.

3. Pastoral approach

- As with most pastors I know, our favorite time of year is the Advent and Christmas season. Sure, there are more things to plan than seems to fit in a calendar. We never seem start planning early enough and promise that next year will be different. Which it isn't. But there's something so up lifting and, dare I say, wondrous, about the Christmas story. Luke 2 has to be one of my favorite parts of the Bible.
- And Christmas Eve services, as tiring as they are to plan, are just a mountain top experience – every year. The Scripture passages don't change, the songs don't change much. But there is something inspiring about singing Silent Night while turning the sanctuary lights down low and using candles instead, held by everyone in attendance.
- At the end of the night, when I return home for all the dad/grandpa duties to prepare for Christmas Day, I am exhausted but living in a joy that is fairly unparalleled by anything else.
- But that first Christmas? Let's paint a different picture.
- It's been a long journey to Bethlehem for Mary and Joseph. Joseph probably walked most of the way. Mary rode a donkey. Neither of those was ideal. Walking 70 miles only to find there is no place to sleep! Riding a donkey when you are nine months pregnant!
- While Joseph frantically searched from inn to inn only to be refused over and over again. NO ROOM! I know Mary is portrayed as this young, innocent, high-favored by God, faithful witness. I've seen my wife and daughters pregnant. Young and innocent gives way to irritable, short-tempered and a gaze that screams – *NO ROOM? Well, you had better find room mister!*
- Ok, before I cross the line of sacrilege – the actual scene must have been exhausting in a way I have never experienced Christmas Eve.
- They probably plopped down on a pile of hay, trying to make Mary comfortable as she goes into labor. No doctor, no sterile room, no family around to help. Cows and sheep for roommates. The smell! And tell that little drummer boy to knock it off! (Good thing he's not really in the story).
- It was noisy. It was chaotic. It was uncomfortable. Child-bearing in the first century is truly a labor of love.
- At some point did Mary or Joseph ever think to themselves – *Really God? The Messiah is going to start his story here? In these conditions?*

- But Jesus is born that night. As exhausted and miserable as their physical bodies must have been, something overcomes their spirits and they realize again that history itself is about to change forever. And they are at the epicenter of that change.
- There really was a thrill of hope that night, even if only for the blessed family. The rest of the world, aside from some shepherds who showed up uninvited, remained weary and depressed.
- The song paints a picture that doesn't live up to reality – except perhaps on a scale that will extend across the centuries. *We* get to rejoice. *We* feel the thrill of hope. And *we* get to look forward to more joy still yet to come.

4. Questions to consider

- As Christians we have been celebrating Christmas every year for centuries now. It's the same story every year. Is it still thrilling to you? Not the opening of packages and eating with gathered families. Is the birth story of Jesus still hopeful to your faith? Are you rejoicing even after being wearied from all the planning, shopping, cleaning, preparing and cooking? Rejoicing that God came in the form of a human baby, to live like we live? To become one of us?
- Read through Luke 2 and Matthew 2 again. The story is so familiar that we can easily pass over details that we might not have noticed before or paid much attention to. What did you find that caught your eye this time?
- When you see all the obstacles that were in the way of Joseph and Mary fulfilling the Scriptures, have you ever thought about *their* resolve in the face of so much that stood in their way? When you think about the obstacles that have been in your life (or may currently be facing), can you use their story to help encourage you to press on, one more step, one more obstacle, one more day?

5. Final thoughts and closing prayer

- The song paints too rosy a picture of the reality of that night, *but*, it does reveal that even during the hardships of life, God is indeed *Emmanuel*, that is, God with us. That thrill of hope now lives in our hearts. That weary world, including us, can still rejoice!
- Let us pray. O God of hope and rejoicing, we too live in a weary world. Life can be overwhelming at times, finances and jobs and disease trying to strip us of our joy. But we find that you are there, not just to “get us through” but to make us victorious over anything that stands in the way of our joy – our joy in knowing that you came to give us life, and life in abundance. This year, Lord, let us know again the thrill of hope and the rejoicing in a weary world. Amen