

## **December 24, 2021 Christmas Eve**

**The Son of God is born in the midst of human life.**

**With all its commotion. All its expectation. All its uncertainty. All its chaotic swings back and forth. All its knowing and not knowing.**

**God becomes incarnate, made human flesh, in the very thick of it all.**

**That night in Bethlehem, the Prince of Peace arrived, but I don't think it was all that peaceful in the sense of calm and quiet.**

**This Census registration is a new thing decreed from on high and causes upheaval. It marks a beginning of more imposition of direct Roman meddling in the affairs of Judea and a more constant, visible, inescapable presence of occupying soldiers in people's everyday lives. It would be impossible for people to know this is what's coming but**

surely many are going to bed this night with a sense of unease and of what will they think of next to make our lives more difficult than they already are?

Already there's the daily grind of getting enough to eat for everyone in a household, caring for animals who represent a livelihood and who get sick and hurt and need care. There's family obligations and religious ones. There's issues of transportation: it's not easy to get far fast and one way or another you must go on foot, your own or your livestock's.

I don't know what all else troubled the minds of those who laid down to rest for the night in close proximity to Mary laboring with her baby boy. Nor, to be fair, what hopes and joy and anticipation of the good things in life, celebrations, weddings, upcoming festivals, they might also have held.

But I suspect these were all held in human bodies that lay not far from where God entered the world in this new and

**unfathomable way: in a human body of his own. With all apologies to some of our most treasured and traditional Christmas carols and pageant plays, it's not likely Jesus came into the world in a cold and isolated stable because an exasperated innkeeper had no better option left to put them up. The Greek word "kataluma" that we hear as "inn" is more often interpreted as a "guest room," such as when this same word is used to describe where Jesus and his disciples would gather to share in the Last Supper.**

**It's more likely Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem to stay with extended family, relatives who would have had one of the larger homes in town to accommodate guests, but others had arrived before them. That and/or the guestroom would not have been big enough to accommodate a woman giving birth. So the best place for them to be would have been the main living area, where in that time animals were brought in for shelter in the night and where their feeding**

area filled with soft hay was the most practical given the circumstances. Yes, ox and ass would likely be looking on but the people who tended them and other guests would have been in earshot at least, sharing the same four exterior walls.

Some argue this isn't a universally accepted way of understanding the scene, even among scholars who have done a deep dive into the very familiar Scripture, so why dwell on this in particular? Isn't it most important that Christ *is* born not so much where and how?

In a culture steeped in the importance of hospitality, making guests feel right at home, this interpretation seems a better fit. And I think it's important to look at it in this way for what it then says about God's coming in to the world in the form of the newborn Jesus.

God made flesh is truly Emmanuel, *God with us*.  
Bursting into life right in the middle of our own hectic lives.

**Not out separated from us all, whether that's to be born in luxurious surroundings like an emperor or king, nor as one rejected or ignored, off some place on the outskirts or outer fringes of a community.**

**Instead I suspect God was very intentional in placing this world-changing event in the middle of a common family in a common home in a small town in a time and place caught up in change they didn't yet understand. Because I suspect God is still getting right in the middle of the lives of ordinary people like you and me and announcing, "I'm here. And I'm here to be with you through everything you live. Good and bad. Joyful and painful. Expected and unexpected. I've come in the middle of it all because I want to be with you, not far off and detached from your real life."**

**I think it's important to trust this is most certainly true in a time when again our whole world is in upheaval. When we aren't certain what the long-lasting impacts of a global**

**pandemic that's already dragged on and made an impact – varying yes, but some level of impact – on everyone, the world over. God is here. God cares about what's going on in our lives and desires very much to come in the middle of it and be present with us in our struggles, our hopes, our every day, our every moment.**

**I know it doesn't always feel that way. I know God can seem distant and far off, removed from our lives. And that guilt can creep into that sense, making us feel like we've done something wrong if we can't feel that intimate closeness of God. But I want to assure you that if you're thinking about God in this way, God is nearer than you think. You're forgiven if you find it hard to believe. But it's no small measure that you are listening. And by the grace of God, may you hear that newborn cry through all the noise and may it begin to bring you peace this night. Amen.**