

I don't know about you, but for me, this text from Luke takes me back home—warm, comfortable feelings of love, family and that odd Norwegian dish my mom would occasionally subject us to. 40 consecutive Christmas Eves and Handel's Messiah have done their job and etched these texts from Luke's across my memory as few other texts are. “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus....”

But this text is not really about comfortable feelings or going home for the holidays. While Joseph may have been returning to the home of his ancestors, they didn't seem to know anyone there—or wouldn't they have had better accommodations?

This text is about going away for the holidays. It is dislocating. People are leaving their homes and lives, going to uncomfortable and unfamiliar locations. From Mary and Joseph to the Shepherds, people are being sent into unknown futures in this passage.

For Palestinians in the first century, or for Palestinians today—for that matter, decrees from the Emperor were not good news. This census is about taxation and Joseph and Mary have to inconvenience themselves at a rather important moment in their lives so that the occupying Roman authorities will be able to properly tax them. Insult to injury. And the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem is long and dusty. A change of climate and geography. Not exactly how I would choose to prepare for the birth of my first born.

It does make me wonder, though. As 9 month pregnant Mary was trying to stay comfortable while riding a donkey over the Judean hills, did she wonder about the angel's pronouncement that heralded the beginning of her pregnancy 9 months earlier? Did it occur to her that it must have been some sort of dream? Because even if you can get your mind around the fact that you, a teenager from Nazareth, are going to become the mother of God, don't you think you'd start wondering when the perks that came with the job were going to arrive? Certainly the indignity of cross country travel and giving birth in a barn were not what she thought would go along with being the mother of God. This just shows why God never chose me to be the Christ bearer. I would have demanded a limo. None of this donkey nonsense for me. But I suspect that the dislocation to Bethlehem as I were about to give birth would make me pause and wonder—this is how the mother of God is treated? Really?

And then, after she's wrapped her baby in cloths she's pulled out of her suitcase, and tries to make herself as comfortable as you can be in a barn, they receive company! Just what every woman wants right after she's given birth—shepherds!

So, as much as we try to make Christmas about comfortable traditions and familiar surroundings, Mary and Joseph didn't know about **that** tradition. They were dislocated and far away from anything they knew when God came to them.

And I hope that those of you who are feeling dislocated these days, whether because of situations in your personal life or from the general state of our economy and the world, I hope that you will note that God left the realm of the invisible and became flesh in the midst of dislocation. It is when we are not comfortable, when we don't know where we are, that we see God.

And the poor shepherds. Think how awkward and dislocating it must have been for them. These shepherds had been minding their own business in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night, when they had the wits scared out of them. They weren't just visited by an angel, but then the glory of the Lord shone around them too. But the angel says what angels always seem to have to say, “Do not fear”. And so these shepherds pull themselves together to listen to the angel's news. And after the angel makes the pronouncement of what they will find in the city of David, a multitude of the heavenly host shows up singing. Not an average night on the mountain side, we can safely guess. But I hope we give the shepherds some credit here. Because rather than sitting around the campfire and making a pact that the crazy things they had just seen would never leave the campfire—what happens in Bethlehem stays in Bethlehem, as it were—they decide to go see for themselves.

Sensible plan. You get there and there's no baby, you consider it a bad dream and go back to tending sheep. But, if you get there to see for yourself, and the angel was right, then you are in possession of some important news.

“I am bringing **you** good news of great joy for **all** the people. To **you** is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”

And that is some radical news. Don't let the radical and shocking nature of this pronouncement get lost in your possible familiarity with the text.

The angel came to shepherds. It isn't often, it isn't EVER, that shepherds are the good news bearers in ancient society. The angel could have appeared at the country club. Or at the Temple. Or at the capital building. Or in Hollywood. But the angel and the heavenly host did not go to the halls of power or influence. They went to people with no voice. People who were more comfortable with livestock than with humans become the bearers of the good news.

And this news, the shepherds realized, was too important to remain in Bethlehem.

Because this good news wasn't just for the people who already had the monopoly on good news. This was good news for all people. So the shepherds go to see for themselves—because if the angel was right then we no longer need to buy into the culture that tells us that good news is only for those who can buy it or control it or commodify it. The good news is for all people.

So, Mary's resting in the stable when in walk the shepherds. These shepherds look like they have just seen a ghost. Or perhaps an entire multitude of them. They silently walk into the barn, as if they're afraid of what they'll find there. And then, when they see the new family, gathered around the feeding trough that holds a baby, they all start talking at once.

“The angel was right.”

“Here he is!”

“Wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger—just like the angel said!” Mary and Joseph can hardly understand them as they try to distinguish which words belong to which voice.

But as “seeing was believing” for the shepherds, I suspect that was true for Mary and Joseph too. Because when they were able to piece together the shepherds' story—angel, heavenly host, Messiah, Savior, Glory to God in the highest heaven, etc—it must have been a confirmation for them as well. As Mary treasured their words and pondered them in her heart, was she thinking, “This may not have happened as we would have scripted, but at least we're not alone in this. These shepherds have seen the angel too. But shepherds? Really?” Perhaps she looked at her son, asleep in the hay, and began to wonder if he wasn't someone she was really going to get to know as much as someone she would spend a long time pondering.

So, the angel has come to us this night as well—unlikely bearers of good news as we may be—and we are invited to go see for ourselves. We are invited to leave our hillsides of comfort and routine and go see for ourselves. I don't know where that might take you, but you are the bearers of good news to a world that is desperately in need of it. “I am bringing **you** good news of great joy for **all** the people. To **you** is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” Amen.