

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph 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. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

I

In the late spring of 2011, I accompanied my wife Amy to her doctor's appointment. Amy was in the late stages of her pregnancy with our twin boys, and at that appointment, the doctor went over the plans for their delivery.

We looked at the calendar and scheduled D-Day for Tuesday, May 31. I put that date in my calendar, and when I got back to the church office later that afternoon, I set about lining up supply preachers for the first few Sundays of June. We got in touch with our families, gave them that date, and they began making their travel plans accordingly.

And then, a little after midnight on May 12, Amy woke me up and said, "Ryan, my water just broke." We called the on-call doctor, and she advised us to meet her at the hospital. I got Amy checked in, and while the nurses were getting her settled, I went and parked the car. It was probably about 1 in the morning at this point, and I was still in sort of a sleepy daze. I walked back into Amy's room, and the on-call doctor was there.

She looked at me, and then she said, "OK, let's get you ready for surgery." And I said, "Surgery? For what?"

And she said, "These babies are coming tonight."

And I said to her, "No ma'am, your office told me May 31. This is May 12. I've still got 19 days to get ready."

But a short while later, I was wearing full surgical scrubs, sitting on a little stool just outside the operating room door. And then a nurse came to brief me, and then she escorted me through the doors. And there were at least a dozen people in the room. There was a team of doctors and nurses for each baby, and of course doctors and nurses for Amy, too. And then at 2:50 and 2:51 a.m., Amy gave birth to our firstborn sons.

II

I learned very quickly what most people already know about newborn babies. They come into the world without any sense of daytime or nighttime. They care not a whit about what you had already planned, about schedules, or about trivial things like imperial decrees or the news of the day.

When a baby is ready to come into the world, it's going to come whether we're ready or not.

III

And perhaps it's because I can relate to him as a father, I've been drawn to the figure of Joseph in recent years. I'm almost certain he was hoping that Mary's pregnancy would last through the trip down to Bethlehem from Nazareth. But Luke tells us that while they were there, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Here in our little college town of Athens, Georgia, we know something about the laws of supply and demand when it comes to room availability, especially on certain weekends in the fall. We understand all about what it's like to live in a relatively small city, and then find it overrun with visitors from all over the world from time to time. So it's easy for us to imagine how crowded Bethlehem must have been, with people coming from points near and far - even though the people came not to connect with old friends or take in a ballgame, but to comply with an imperial decree regarding the census and tax rolls.

And so in our popular imaginations, in our nativity scenes, in our Christmas pageants, the scene usually plays out like this. Joseph and Mary, who is very obviously near the end of her pregnancy, make the long journey from Nazareth down to Bethlehem. And when they finally arrive in the town already packed with people, they present themselves at the local motel, only to find a no vacancy sign, and so, with nowhere else to go, they bed down for the night in a barn, somewhere on one of the back lots, out of the way. And when the time comes to give birth to her child, we assume that the only one there to help was Joseph.

But I wonder. I wonder if we've read this story so often, if we've handled it so much in our nativity scenes and our Christmas cards and pageants, if we've made so many cultural assumptions based on our own experience and understanding, that we run a risk of

reading some things into Luke's Christmas story that aren't really there? What if Mary and Joseph never went to an inn at all? And what if they weren't all alone when the time came to deliver the baby?

Now, you should know that when you present yourself for ordination to the Ministry of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church, you are required to take and pass examinations in biblical Greek and Hebrew. And you should know that I enjoyed those examinations I took them not once, not twice, but three times.

But the word that Luke uses here for inn only appears twice more in the entire New Testament – once much later in Luke's gospel, and once in Mark's gospel. And in both of those other instances, this same word that we read as "inn" is translated in our English Bibles as "guest room."

So what if Mary laid the baby Jesus in the manger, because there was no place for them in the *guest room*?

Personally, I prefer this reading for a number of reasons. First of all, in Near Eastern cultures, both then and now, extending welcome and hospitality to travelers is a very big deal. Even with all of the overcrowding already in Bethlehem, it would have been a huge cultural faux pas for anyone to just outright turn away these travelers, especially given Mary's obviously very advanced pregnancy.

Second, they traveled to Bethlehem from Nazareth because Joseph was of the house and line of David, and all the world was told to go to their hometowns to be registered for the census. It seems highly unlikely that Joseph would show up in his hometown and not find a distant relative, even a third cousin twice removed, with whom he couldn't have arranged lodging just for the night.

In most ancient Near Eastern homes, a livestock stable wasn't a freestanding structure, like an outbuilding, rather, it was incorporated into the house. On the ground level were the stalls for the animals, and the family quarters were on a platform up above, something like a loft.

So maybe Joseph and Mary presented themselves there in the city of David not at an inn or a hotel, but at the home of one of Joseph's relatives, but the guest room was already full with other aunts, uncles, and cousins. And so Mary and Joseph bedded down in the animal stall, which wasn't out back, but just downstairs, within view and within earshot of the main living area of the house.

And maybe when Mary went into labor that night, perhaps Joseph was not the only one there. Perhaps there was a whole host of relatives – aunts and nieces and cousins ready to welcome new life into the world.

I don't want to mess too much with your nativity scenes or your Christmas pageants. But for me, this

idea makes a difference – that the Savior of the world comes into the world not in barn somewhere out back, but right in the middle of the house, right into the middle of a family, right in the middle of everyday life, whether we're ready or not, whether there's room in the guest room or not, Jesus comes, because he is Emmanuel – God with us.

And here's why I think that matters. I think we are taught in our culture that religion should be mostly a private affair – something that we keep out of sight most of the time. I think we are taught in our culture that our religion should be unobtrusive, kept out in the back, where we can go check on it from time to time, but otherwise left alone.

But I have a hard time wrapping my mind around the idea that God became incarnate for us, that Jesus was not born for us, lived for us, was betrayed and crucified for us, and raised again in glory for us, so that we can have a nice little story to consider a few times a year.

IV

What if the inbreaking of God into the world doesn't depend on your timetables and your ideas about convenience or custom, but it comes anyway?

What if the inbreaking of God into the world doesn't know anything about imperial decrees or your carefully made travel plans, but comes anyway?

What if the inbreaking of God into the world doesn't happen somewhere out in the back, but right in the middle of your daily life, with its challenges and blessings and joys and sorrows?

What if God breaks into your world like that, my friend? Not just a few days a year, or a few hours a week, not just when it's most convenient, but right there in the middle of your regularly scheduled programming?

My friend, this child whose birth we mark this night is named Emmanuel – which means God with us. And God so wants to be in relationship with you that God is not willing to wait for silly things like schedules or your carefully made plans. As the carol we'll sing tonight proclaims, "Joy to the world, the Lord is come. So move over, and let every heart prepare him room."

Or something like that.

V

These are dark days in our world, both figuratively and literally. Just a few nights ago, here in the Northern Hemisphere, we observed more hours of darkness than on any other night of the year. Our nation is more divided than ever, and the princes of this world still busy themselves with imperial decrees and tweets and juvenile name-calling.

But the child whose birth we mark this night is not moved by decrees or Tweets or of the plans of kings and princes. The world needs to know that in this night is born in the city of David a

Savior, who is the Messiah. And so the world needs us to live our faith not in the back lot, not carefully tucked away out of sight, not only a few days a year or a few hours a week. The world needs to know that the kingdom of God is breaking into the world, whether the world is ready or not.

The world needs to know that God is breaking into the world not just in small groups of one or two of us. God is breaking into the world in this huge extended family that we call the church – a family full of squabbles and fights and irritations to be sure, but a family that is gathering to welcome the Christ-child right in the middle of this house.

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not, and will not, overcome it.

Thanks be to God. Amen.