

Stations of the Manger

a) Mary (Luke 1:26-38)

We can only imagine the shock and confusion that Mary experienced when visited by the angel. The message was even more unbelievable – that she would bear the long-awaited Messiah of God. But as more details were explained to her, particularly how she would conceive, she quickly came to terms with the fantastic proposal God was holding out to her. Mary's agreeing to it speaks of her humility and faith, the strength of trust in the hand of God at work in her life, despite the danger and ridicule she might face for being found with child before the wedding. What courage and belief in God's will that everything would be accomplished exactly as she was told by the angel!

No wonder she sings a song of praise in being chosen for this special task. "Oh, how my soul praises the Lord. How my spirit rejoices in God my Savior! For he took notice of his lowly servant girl, and from now on all generations will call me blessed. For the Mighty One is holy, and he has done great things for me." (Luke 1:46-49) She mentions how God turns around human ideas by raising up the lowly and putting down those who are powerful. She concludes her song with the promise God made to her ancestors to send a deliverer for his people. How this would come about in the months and years ahead could only be left up to God.

b) Joseph (Matthew 1:18-25)

Imagine the dismay when Joseph discovered that his beloved Mary was pregnant! He faced a great dilemma. To divorce her would jeopardize Mary's life; not to would jeopardize his own. We aren't told of the many things that might have gone through his mind as he considered the situation: his reputation as a righteous man, the business community that relied on his integrity, Jewish law and tradition. Defend his honor or distance himself through divorce even if discrete? It took the angelic messenger in a dream to reassure him that the child was of God, not another human man. Mary hadn't been unfaithful. The marriage could go ahead as planned.

This followed the ancient betrothal custom where Joseph approached Mary's father with his proposal, as marriage was about property and the legitimacy of family. After agreeing on the *mohar* or bride-price, Joseph was invited for an interview with the parents. Mary would have filled three cups of wine, leaving hers empty. Joseph would have described his assets, skills, faithfulness to Torah and all the qualities that made him the most suitable choice. Having reached a conclusion, the young woman made plain her feelings for or against by either filling her cup and taking a sip, or turning it over. Joseph would return to his home to prepare a place for her, the intervening time assuring that any child would indeed be that of the husband. It took a great deal of faith and courage on his part to believe in what God was doing in Mary.

c) Birth (Luke 2:1-7)

Both history and archeology confirm the setting of the birth of Jesus, between 4 and 6 BC following the usual Roman practice of census-taking for taxation. As King Herod was in poor

health, Roman Emperor Augustus felt that it would be a good time to assess the situation before a possible change of leadership. Thus, Joseph and Mary traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea six miles south of Jerusalem, as he was a descendant of the house of David. Popular telling of the story has put their arrival as an emergency, desperate to find a place for the birth just about to take place. But Scripture doesn't say this, only "while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born." (v.6), possibly a few days or a few weeks after arrival in Bethlehem.

As well, the idea of giving birth in a cold, dark cave doesn't match the situation as described by Luke in his gospel. He was very careful to choose precise Greek words to convey what he was meaning, and the one he chose to describe the place that wasn't available for Mary wasn't lodging in a commercial inn (Greek *pandocheion*), but lodging in a private home, in the *katalyma* or guest chamber. The typical Jewish house of the first century had three adjoining parts: one for the animals, another for the family, and a third for guests. It was this room that wasn't available, so Joseph and Mary would have been invited into the family's own heated quarters where there was a manger or feeding trough for the animals that frequently were allowed in for warmth on cold nights. In this private setting Jesus came into the world.

d) Shepherds and Angels (Luke 2:8-20)

A Jewish commentary from the first century on Psalm 23 says of shepherds, "There is no more disreputable occupation than that of a shepherd." That may have been the case for many of them, but perhaps not for those around Bethlehem who looked after the animals destined for the Temple in Jerusalem. Year round, the shepherds guarded their flocks seeing to it that no lambs were stolen, that none were injured or harmed to cause blemish, rendering them unworthy of sacrifice. It was to these people that God chose to announce the holy birth by sending angels with glad tidings - the host of heaven celebrating in joyous song.

The shepherds made the most of this unusual event by hurrying to Bethlehem to check it out, making sure that what they were told was true. What they found was even more amazing than the angelic chorus – Israel's messiah and king swaddled in the clothes of newborns, lying in a bed of fresh hay. No wonder they spread the word to all who would listen as they returned to their flocks. No wonder the baby's mother Mary pondered in her heart what all this could mean as she raised the child of God.

e) Christmas for Today

Having traveled through the stations of the manger, what can we take with us from the story of the first Christmas? Do we have the same excitement and joy when we encounter God's anointed One as the shepherds did? Then let's go out and share God's love with others. Do we proclaim the Good News of Christ among us like the angels did in song and word? Do we extend hospitality to others, particularly those in need like the kind people who gave Mary and Joseph a place to birth the Christ child? Do we have the compassion of Joseph who accepted God's call to

shelter and nurture the child and his mother? Do we have the trust and faithfulness of Mary who went forward with God's purpose in her life despite the hardships and challenges she would face?

As we move into Christmas Day, may our celebrations reflect our joy in Immanuel – “God-with-us”. Amen.