

# What Gift Shall I Bring?

A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent  
Christmas Eve - December 24, 2007

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## I.

We have gathered on this holiest of nights to hear a familiar story, to participate in tradition, and to consummate the season in an act of worship.

We have huddled together in the dimmed light of the sanctuary to enjoy the peace and comfort of this time and this place and this people.

Tonight is holy because it is set apart, unique among nights of the year, and we come together hoping that this holiness, this hope, might replant itself within our hearts, hearts made weary by the routines of the world, routines of violence, fracture, triviality, and consumption.

During the season leading up to this night, the season of Advent, those gathered in this sanctuary considered a question, "What gift shall I bring?"

Our question derived from the final verse of that beloved hymn by Christina Rossetti, written in 1872, two years before the founding of this church: "What can I give Him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb. If I were a wise one, I would do my part. Yet what can I give Him? Give my heart."

Writing in England, Rossetti might have exaggerated the bleakness of the weather greeting Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, but her question concerning a worthy gift is as apropos now as it was when she composed it.

The flurry of the Christmas shopping season is behind us, and, as every year, there are stories to tell.

Stories of the special kindness of people infected by joy and unashamed to share it.

And stories of special rudeness of people affected by anxiety and unashamed to inflict it.

One of the grand narratives of the season is the epic tension for those dually-aligned with a materially-rich world and with the biblical story.

Contrary to material wealth, the biblical story of the origins of the Messiah describe a context of starkness and simplicity.

Hearing that story again, we tell ourselves, if only I could slough off the beast, rely less upon that which does not endure, pledge my allegiance

not to the consumer state, but to the state of love and love alone. If only.

Tonight, we hear again and consider anew, the story that is the origin of this holy night.

This story neither expects nor requires our total allegiance, but it does beg a fresh hearing, requests the offering of generous ears, pleads for the opportunity to enter in once again and begin its subtle work of world transformation.

## II.

It begins with a census, a decree of the empire, of the emperor himself. What an ordeal.

Lives are thrown into disarray so that the emperor may coerce, count, and codify his subjects.

It is always the role of empire to engage in half-cocked power plays to remind people who holds power.

During the reign of the Roman Empire, announcement of a census would often provoke revolt, followed by brutal repression.

There is no sign this was the case the year of Jesus' birth.

Perhaps it was because the emperor at the time, Augustus, "the august one," reigned at a time of extraordinary peace and prosperity.

He was even referred to as "Savior" by his loyal sycophants.

For a period of time, it looked as though the empire's claims for itself - enduring well-being for all the people - just might be true.

An empire, whether the Pax Romana or the Pax Americana - is always self-affirming, tempting its subjects to believe that peace is at hand or just around the corner.

The year of Jesus' birth, his parents, Joseph and Mary, with all of their neighbors, dutifully took to the road, returning to their ancestral towns so that they might be counted, subjects of the empire.

What the empire always underestimates, however, is the power of the people to remember.

Names themselves can be symbols of collective memory.

In Hebrew, her name was not Mary, but Miriam, she who led the women out of slavery in Egypt, she who took up tambourine and sang the oldest words in the Bible, Exodus 15, verse 21, "Sing to the Lord, for he has triumphed gloriously; horse and rider he has thrown into the sea."

Embedded in her very name was resistance to the controlling powers.

Luke's gospel tells the story of Jesus' conception, birth, and infancy from the perspective of his mother, Miriam.

In the Gospel of Matthew, Joseph names their child, but in Luke, the angel who visits Mary says, "you will name him Jesus."

Actually in Hebrew, the name is *Yeshua*, which means "God saves."

Against the background of an empire-wide decree, Mary and her husband Joseph arrive in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem, the city of David, where King David was born and where he grew up a lowly shepherd.

Bethlehem was a common destination for pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem.

People would pay homage to David's city and purchase animals to be sacrificed at the Jerusalem temple.

Bethlehem, a small town, was accustomed to having large groups of travelers pass through it.

### III.

As our translation tells it, in Luke, chapter 2, Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem and there was no room in the inn.

I want to suggest we reimagine the notion that there was no room in the inn.

The English translation conjures up for us the image of a quaint inn staffed by a sole innkeeper with a "No Vacancy" sign out front.

While that scene may be familiar to us, it is not an accurate portrayal of Judea 2000 years ago.

It was more likely that there was a travelers' lodge in Bethlehem.

The lodge would have been a one-room shelter meant to accommodate both human travelers and their animals.

It is likely that Mary and Joseph arrived at such a lodging.

But what is the word translated as "inn"? The word is *katalyma*, and refers to guest lodgings.

At the travelers' lodge where they would have sought shelter, the *katalyma* was the raised platform on which travelers would sleep on cots or mats or the floor itself.

On the level below the *katalyma* were the animals.

No room in the inn possibly means that there was no room up on the *katalyma*.

There was only room for Mary and Joseph down with the animals, amidst the sheep, the cattle, the burros, and their mangers.

This alternate rendering has several implications for our understanding of the story.

Mary and Joseph were not cast out by their own people.

They were given the best accommodations available.

Mary did not give birth all alone in a cattle stall somewhere.

She gave birth amidst the animals in a room that was also crowded with travelers.

How would one sleep, let alone give birth, with all of that noise, and stench?

Yes, Jesus' birth was lowly and humble, but he was among family, his parents and his extended Jewish family.

After mentioning no room on the *katalyma*, Luke shifts the focus of his gospel to "shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night" (v. 8).

In the same way that Marlboro ads idealize cowboys, so have we tended to idealize the shepherds in Luke's story.

Truth be told, shepherds were not all that trustworthy.

Because of the nature of their vocation, they kind of lived by their own rules.

Yes, they were Jews, but they largely lived outside the law because the wandering sheep kept them from participating in the cultic life of their people.

They were kind of like modern-day truckers, spending days and weeks apart from family and civic life, part of a culture of their own.

Like truckers, shepherds spent much time under the open sky, wide open landscapes on their horizon.

Like truckers, shepherds were involved in get-your-hands-dirty kind of work.

It was to these shepherds that an angel of the Lord appeared.

Into the routine of their shepherding lives, a great light, a great glory, a great presence appeared.

And they were terrified.

An older translation says, "they were sore afraid."

I prefer this gentler rendering of a common expression, "they were scared witless."

In his telling of the story of the shepherds, Garrison Keillor suggests that maybe they were drinking and when the angel of the Lord appeared, they frantically tried to hide the bottle.

In any case, the angel appeared and gave a word of good news: "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.”

That was a lot of information for the shepherds to take in all at once, especially as they picked themselves up off the ground.

Then the angel gave them a task, to go from the field and look for this sign: “you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

Just as they started to sort out the cognitive dissonance between the promise of a savior-messiah-lord and the less-than-glorious sign of a child in a feeding trough, a whole Out Loud Chorus of angels showed up, belting out a doxology, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors.”

When the angels left, the shepherds, of course, went to Bethlehem to find the child.

Like the urgency of Jesus’ first disciples, who left their nets at the seaside, the shepherds went with haste and found the child lying in the manger.

Can you imagine Mary and Joseph’s reaction when the shepherds arrived? I mean, it’s okay to put your newborn into the arms of a grandma or an uncle or a close friend, but a group of truckers, coffee on their breath, diesel scent clinging to their clothes, pieces of a truck stop sandwich on their beards, and smears of grease on their hands and shirt?

“We were in a caravan on I-70. We were on the radio, chatting about whatever. Then there was a light, a presence, a sound. We all pulled over onto the shoulder. We can’t explain it and we’re a little embarrassed, but we were also convinced and we had come and see for ourselves. And it’s true!”

They linger for awhile, pass the baby around, coo and hmm and ahh. Then they go on into the night, telling everyone who will hear them. The outsiders are invited in.

Those not in the know are let in on the secret.

The nomads are invited into the lodge.

The promise is shared and fulfilled, in fact it is fulfilled in its being shared. And nobody’s lives are the same again.

#### IV.

At his birth, there was no room on the *katalyma* for the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord.

He would have to wait till his life neared its end.

The only other place where the word *katalyma* appears in the Gospel of Luke refers to the location of the Last Supper.

The word translated “upper room” is *katalyma*.

One can imagine Jesus, gathering with his friends and disciples in that *katalyma*.

He remembers his parents, especially his mother, Miriam of the tambourine, as he sits down.

Outside those walls, the powers of the empire still conspire against him. But now, there is enough room in the *katalyma* for everyone.

When he takes bread and breaks it, he’s thinking about the story of his birth his mother once told him: “There was no room on the *katalyma*, so we had to lay you in a manger.”

He imagines himself as a baby, lying in the place where animals ate their food.

He looks at the motley crowd of disciples around him, insiders and outsiders, no two alike. “This is my body,” he tells them, “Food for you. When you eat it, remember me.” Amen.