

More Than a Gesture

Luke 2:1-20

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Tonight, we revisit the old, familiar story. Mary and Joseph making their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Mary very close to giving birth. How old was Mary? Of course, we don't know, the text doesn't say. But it was common then to marry off women, girls, as soon as they could reasonably bear children. Of course, a lot of that is going to depend on genetics and nutrition, but my best guess is she was about 14 or 15. If you were wealthy and could afford it you might keep your daughters home longer, until they were almost 20. But we learned last week Mary and Joseph are **not** wealthy. So, 14 or 15 seems about right.

How long did it take to get to Bethlehem? It's about 90 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. I'm sure there were dirt roads or at least good animal tracks from town-to-town, but we don't know their route. Notice there's no mention of a donkey. Did Mary ride, did she walk? We don't know. How long would it take a young teenager in her 3<sup>rd</sup> trimester to walk 90 miles over rough terrain? I have no clue.

Eventually, they make their way to Bethlehem and Mary famously gives birth, probably in a cave. The stone in that area is very soft and caves were commonly used for keeping livestock. Were there animals in the cave with them? We don't know. The text doesn't say. In any case Bethlehem is crowded, and Mary and Joseph are too poor to rent a room in a private home. The point is, they exist on the margin.

Speaking of margins, out in the countryside are shepherds, keeping watch over their flocks by night. At this time, shepherding was a pretty low occupation. If you couldn't find anything else, you could be a shepherd. Which meant shepherds were a pretty rough bunch. You wouldn't want your 14-year-old daughter to marry one.

But, these are the ones to whom the angels appear. These scruffy, low-class shepherds are the first to hear the good news of God becoming a human being.

The point is God is on the side of humanity in general, but God has a special place for the poor, the powerless. Think about it. A poor couple making their way in difficult conditions at the whim of a foreign ruler. Giving birth under very difficult circumstances. And their first visitors are these scruffy, ne'er-do-wells working the only jobs they can manage.

In Jesus, God has become human but God is also very clearly on the side of the powerless, the marginal. God is on the side of the impoverished. Our story is making a clear and powerful statement. God is on the side of those who exist on the margins of society. It's a powerful message, powerfully told.

But what if that was the end of the message? What if, after the shepherds left, baby Jesus had ascended into heaven? What if the angels had swooped down and carried him away?

Would Jesus' birth have still been a powerful statement of how much God loves us? Or would it have been a mere gesture of love and solidarity? Gesture? Statement?

Of course, we know baby Jesus did not ascend to heaven. We know he grew up, was baptized, taught us how to live godly lives. He fed and healed and walked on water. He preached the good news so passionately he was eventually crucified. But then he was raised from the dead and is now in heaven with God, waiting to welcome us there.

Jesus' birth was not just a gesture of solidarity towards humanity. It was not just a nod to how much God loves us and cares for us. Jesus' birth was the beginning of a powerful statement. It was the beginning of a powerful statement that took a lifetime, and more. Jesus' birth was the first part of the powerful statement God loves us in this life and the next. This is good news. Thanks be to God.

But it also raises an important question.

Have you, have we, ever found ourselves making a gesture rather than a statement? Have you ever found yourself in an argument with someone and you tried making it up with a special meal, flowers, chocolate? Ever done that? Were you making a gesture of reconciliation, or were you making a genuine statement of remorse? Gesture? Statement?

I'm sure we all have Christmas presents on our minds. Are those presents a gesture towards social convention, or are they a statement of genuine gratefulness and affection?

What about our relationship to God? Many of us are very comfortable with religiosity. We're glad to give to a special offering. We're happy being seen in worship. Maybe we wear religious jewelry or clothes with a religious message. When we do, are we making a genuine witness to our faith? Or is it a mere gesture, a nod towards God?

Sometime ago, I'm not sure where I was, but I was in a cemetery. I had finished a graveside service. The funeral director and I were admiring some of the gravestones. We stopped to admire one in particular. It was at least twice as big as all the others and very nicely done. Jesus with the cross and crown of thorns. Little lambs. Some Bible verses. It really stood out!

The funeral director and I were standing there admiring it and he said he had known this couple. I asked him, 'were they that way in life'? Meaning, did the grave marker really represent their faith? Was it a statement about their firm beliefs?

He just shook his head. "Nah, they weren't."

How sad. That beautiful grave marker was not making a statement about their belief in God's love and their hope in the resurrection. It was a nod, a gesture towards God. Nothing more. I felt sorry for them.

In a few minutes we're going to sing Silent Night by candlelight. As is our practice, we'll sing the first verse in German. Why do we do that? Are we making a statement? Are we saying the faith of our ancestors is our faith, too? Are we publicly stating the God who guided them across the oceans and across the country, the God who helped them prosper here, are we making a bold statement that that God is our God, too? Are we publicly stating we are continuing to worship the God of our ancestors?

Or is it a nod to our ancestry, a gesture towards our heritage?

Tonight, we are celebrating more than a grand gesture. In the birth of Jesus, we are celebrating God's powerful statement of solidarity and love for humanity in general, and the poor and powerless in particular.

May this night also be a powerful statement for us. May this night, this service, be more than a simple public gesture, a nod in

God's general direction. May this night be our firm statement we are living as God's children, walking in the light of Jesus, and loving others in his name.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.