
From the Pastor's Desk

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Christmas in Context

It's a peaceful scene. There's the baby in the manger, perhaps a slight aura about his head. There's his mother, kneeling beside the manger, her face calm and her clothing unmussed. (She has evidently had an easy delivery.) Standing nearby is the father, bearded and solemn, keeping watch. There's a cow nearby and maybe a donkey. Before the peaceful scene are two shepherds. One is standing, his shepherd's crook leaning on one shoulder. The second is kneeling and has a lamb draped around his neck like a scarf. Their faces are clean, and the sheep are docile. On the shepherds' left are three magi from far away to the east. They wear rich clothes, and each holds a jeweled chest or a golden vial containing a costly gift. A camel, just one, stands behind them.

Right? You can picture this scene, can't you, having seen it thousands of times before. But it might not be quite accurate. For starters, Mary had just had a baby in a stable without a midwife and certainly without anything to dull the pain. She was dirty, covered in blood, asleep if she was lucky, crying if she wasn't. In addition, there's no reason to think the shepherds and magi were there at the same time, and very good reasons to think that by the time the magi got to Bethlehem, Jesus was already a toddler, and Joseph and Mary had moved into a house (Matthew 2:11). So the context of Jesus' birth was a little different.

Now let's expand that context a little. How were things beyond the little town of Bethlehem? Well, Bethlehem was a tiny backwater town in an insignificant province of the Roman empire, which ruled all its provinces by brutality and fear. The Romans despised the Jews, who despised them back, along with all non-Jews (they especially hated the sort-of Jewish people to the north called the Samaritans, who claimed that they worshiped the same God as the Jews but had a different temple and a different

holy book). The Romans had a governor in place to rule Judea, who dealt with any sign of dissent by crucifying as many Jews as he could round up. There was also a “king” named Herod, ruling with Roman permission, who was a paranoid megalomaniac, frantically concerned with hanging on to his own power and willing to kill anyone who got in his way. This is the Herod who heard about the messiah born in Bethlehem and had all male children under the age of two executed.

So the context for the first Christmas was a combination of fear, poverty, filth, hatred, racial suspicion, threatened rebellion. And it was to this context that the angels sang, “Peace on earth,” and announced the birth of a Savior. It was into this context that God took on flesh and was born. His first steps were taken in a place defined by hatred, and as a child he was surrounded by racial distrust and a simmering pot of possible rebellion. And yet, when he began his public ministry, he visited Samaritans, ate with Roman collaborators, and talked about loving your enemies.

Yeah, it’s been a hard fall. No matter who you voted for last month, you’ve been disturbed since then by hints of rebellion and acts of hatred against women and minorities. What are we to do in this difficult context? How are we supposed to respond?

Really? Do we even need to ask?