

LUKE 2:1–20

Exploring the Scripture

On the face of it, this scripture details the unremarkable birth of yet another child into poverty, in an overcrowded village. The parents-to-be are directed by Roman decree to leave their hometown of Nazareth and travel to Bethlehem, the ancestral home of the father, to be officially counted and registered. We assume it was a difficult journey for Mary and Joseph, taking into account Mary's pregnancy. But as oppressed people, there was little choice; they were required to comply with the decree.

At a deeper level, one objective of this text is for the readers to make the connection between Joseph's ancestry in the house and lineage of David (centered in Bethlehem) and the prophesied advent of a Messiah (Micah 5:2). Another objective of the beginning of the story is to help us visualize and understand the oppressive political environment in which Mary and Joseph are living.

The humble setting of this story continues as shepherds in their fields are overwhelmed by the angel message. Shepherding was considered the lowliest of professions—a curious choice for those who are to witness the newborn Messiah. In addition to Mary and Joseph, the circumstances and social standing of the shepherds are indications of God's upside-down kingdom—"the last will be first, and the first will be last" (Matthew 20:16).

Within this account, shepherds witness the heavenly event and testify of the importance of what has happened. As witnesses go, shepherds would not have been at the top of the list of those who have credibility or importance. Though all the participants in the Luke text are considered poor and humble, this does not diminish their joy and praise for what God has done. Just like the heavenly host, the shepherds return home, "glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen" (v. 20)—a celebration of the birth of Jesus, the Messiah. God breaks in on the usual and expected with an incarnational message delivered by socially unacceptable participants.

The name Emmanuel signals "God with us." While we know Christ came into the world as Savior for everyone, it appears that God chose to dwell within the humble, ostracized, and poor of that time and place. This foreshadows Jesus' ministry, as he will also choose to walk with the poor, marginalized, and outcast. In the person of Jesus, God graces the world with a message of hope and favor not tied to birthrights, education, or worldly success. Jesus is "God's Love Made Visible!" (Iola Brubeck, *Community of Christ Sings* 411) for all people.

Central Ideas

Mary and Joseph were members of an oppressed people and culture. Shepherds were at the bottom of the social classes.

2. The birth of Jesus illustrates God choosing to "dwell with" those who are poor, outcast, and marginalized; Emmanuel means "God with us."
3. Jesus came to bring hope for all people. He is God's love made visible.

Questions for the Speaker

Identify those who are oppressed and marginalized in today's world. How does God in Christ speak hope to them?

2. How is this scripture an example of God's upside-down kingdom?
3. In what ways does this story illustrate the hymn text: "How silently, how silently the wondrous gift is given!" (Phillips Brooks, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" *Community of Christ Sings* 434)?
4. Why do you think Mary, Joseph, and the shepherds make powerful participants in the story?
5. On this Christmas Day, what message can you share with those who are struggling, mourning, and despondent? What is the good news that will cause all to rejoice at the manger?