

Emmanuel: God Came Near - A Story That Moves People

(For There Is POWER In The Story!)

12.26.2021

First let's deal with the elephant in the room: Christmas is OVER!

SURE it is, you're saying... "You should see my house!" You've got empty boxes everywhere, gadgets and toys and fluffy new throws, you know, the kind of blankets where the "Sherpa" doesn't look like someone may have used it to wipe gravy off their feet, and there's always some hair caught in it, but doesn't appear to be the hair of anyone in your home! You've got a vaulted ceiling yet somehow there's a stray piece of shredded wrapping paper caught on the blade of your ceiling fan. Shoved into a corner is a stack of unread assembly directions, which never WILL be read. One of your kids spent the night in their favorite toy last night, that is a cardboard box that used to contain the most expensive electronic and digitally connective toy of this year's shopping season! You'd like to clean up a bit but every time you bend over you're reminded that someone thought it would be a *genius* idea to arm everyone in your house with Nerf guns.

And the KITCHEN! Don't get me started! A huge stack of dirty dinner dishes is still in place because you are going to get to them later. On top of that stack is a precariously balanced collection of drinking glasses and mugs—Why can't we use the same glass for longer than 10 minutes in this house!?!—, and under that stack is a pile of the cooking dishes you used to make that dinner, 3 of which need to be soaked, and one of which may end up in the trash can regardless of how it stays submerged. The stove is a mess, but at least the dog is making headway on whatever it was that was spilled down the oven door and semi-baked on.

Christmas is over?... Ha. Especially since Christmas Day fell on a Saturday this year, and it carries over to Sunday so much because it's still the weekend. And since we're still so connected, I will officially declare this Christmas Sunday, and so, without apology, we're going to spend some time in the true Christmas Story this morning!

I love the Christmas Story! I still remember as a small child looking at the little Nativity scene my parents had. It was low-rent, everything plastic and glued into place, but I knew that it must represent a mystical tale of people long ago and far away. Later, when we had started attending church and actually reading the Bible, I understood so much more. And unfortunately was of an age to be recruited into our small-church Christmas stage productions, which involved a lot of beach towels and bathrobes. But still, most of my understanding of the Birth of Christ was shaped more by popular music and televised Claymation specials!

(The Gospel Coalition) R. T. France quips:

Most people's awareness of the Christmas story is derived mainly from school nativity plays, in which Luke's tea-toweled shepherds rub shoulders with Matthew's magi (promoted to royal status), and a surly innkeeper and his wife are surrounded by infant angels with tinsel halos. Add to this cocktail an array of Christmas cards depicting a glowing stable surrounded by bleak midwinter snow and populated by a smiling ox and ass, and you have the ingredients for the satisfyingly feel-good *Schmaltzfest* that is the modern Christmas.

--R. T. France

I think that part of the power of the Christmas Story stems from its **Emotional Heart**. This time of year will often begin to propel us into new areas of tenderness in our relationships to others. Or new realms of generosity when it comes to sharing or helping people in need. We often begin showing surprising and unusual amounts of consideration where we might normally be popping a vein. We might stop before wolfing down that last slice of pumpkin pie left in the kitchen, and out of consideration to the family, take it into the bathroom and eat it privately behind a locked door. But there is something innate about that Bethlehem story that can tempt us into becoming kinder, gentler, a bit more selfless. And let's be honest, most of us could really use that kind of push, perhaps just as much as did Scrooge himself!

For 26 years running, Harvester Christian Church in St. Charles, MO hosted an event called Journey to Bethlehem, a Christmas experience with more Emotional Heart than nearly any other holiday moment I've ever experienced. The event capitalized on the property surrounding their building, as well as some of the building itself, running upwards of 10,000 visitors through each year. Inside the building you were given a brief introduction to what you would experience, and really set the stage for the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. There was a makeshift Marketplace where you could interact with various merchants dressed in period outfits, though largely they were just stalling for time while they spaced out groups making the "journey". Eventually your group would be called, and you would be led out onto the property and down a pathway meandering into the darkness. Torches would provide illumination, and your Guide knew the way. Roman guards in full regalia would be making their way towards you, and it was a reminder that the people of God had lived under an occupation. You'd squeeze to the edge of the pathway to get out of their way, and note in their passing that the spears were quite real. And sharp. One of the guards might even stop and demand to see your papers (which you had been given prior to the tour).

A little ways down you would come upon a group of shepherds around a fire with a few live sheep penned up. You'd eavesdrop a bit while they griped about politics, the Romans, the cold, the aggravating sheep, but it wasn't a bad place/time to find a warm fire. Suddenly a bright light would blast out of the sky along with a couple of characters dressed as angels, who pronounced the birth of the Messiah. And while it was just pretend, it felt like more than that, as you had just a taste of what the shepherds might have felt that night long ago.

But the final stop was the best. Eventually you'd come to the end of the journey and into a small barn-like building. You knew what would be inside, and it really didn't matter that it was all pretend. Still, it was a bit of a shock to see a real Joseph, and a real Mary, and a real baby in a makeshift manger. More than once I completed the Journey to Bethlehem, but every time I went, when you were in the little barn, everyone was completely silent. There was Power in the Story, that you could feel. It was a gut feeling, something of the emotions. But even if that didn't get you, there were sometimes other aspects that might.

Such as the recounting of one of those tours earlier in the season, which found among the crowd a young family with a little girl, maybe 3 or 4 years old... whatever that prime age is for dragging around a woobie, in her case a well-loved stuffed bunny. As every group did, they all stood in the darkness, quiet for fear of disturbing the sleeping baby. And the little girl's eyes were wide as she took him in. When the group was ushered out, they continued in silence, except for a hissed reprimand from a parent as a little girl, maybe 3 or 4 years old, whatever the prime age is for dragging around a well-loved bunny, pushed loose from her parents and ran back into the barn, to lay her bunny in the manger where it could bring comfort to the little Christ child.

Emotional Heart has a righteous place in the Christmas Story. If God intended otherwise, He would not have involved an innocent young girl wrongly accused of low morals, a heroic man who would stand as father to a child not his own, a King born into poverty and only recognized by the simplest of laborers and the most exotic of dignitaries, or a ruler so evil that the murder of any number of infants and toddlers was an acceptable price to pay if it kept him in power a little longer.

But it is of vital importance for us to remember that The Christmas Story has an **Intellectual Heart** as well. Good old R. T. France called it right with his "Schmaltzfest" tag! We might be more accurate on the details of how the Grinch stole Christmas or how Santa defeated the Martians than we are about exactly how the actual, factual Bethlehem account played out.

Over the years in my ministry studies, and diving into the findings of serious commentators and scholars, I discovered new depths to the Story. Moreover, I started learning why the details of the story mattered. If you were here for *One Christmas Night*, or watched the replay on Youtube, you may remember me talking about how God had left a trail of clues called Prophecies that led all the way from the Garden of Eden to the Manger. And those prophecies were of vital importance, because they were what would identify the true Messiah when He arrived. You need to remember that pretty much every Jewish mother and father, grandmother and grandfather, hoped that their child might be The One. Talk about pressuring your kid!! You can almost see a couple of grandmothers watching over a group of rowdy kids and giving an aside: "Well Esther's kid is no

Messiah!” But those prophecies, they were the proof, the litmus test for the genuine article!

And so each year I research a little more, and I end up uncovering more information or some new misconception I didn’t know I was misconceiving. I am here to burst your bubbles! Here are a few for your consideration:

1) Jesus was born on December 25th. o.o

That date has been associated with the birth of Jesus for years. In fact, the first known evidence of that date being in use was found in a Roman calendar from 336 AD, around the time Constantine declared that Christianity was the state religion. There’s no actual scriptural evidence for the date of the birth of Jesus, and it’s difficult to pin down the exact reason we landed on the 25th. It might be the repurposing of a pagan festival, but we can’t be sure. One school of thought likes the idea that Mary conceived on March 25th, the same date they believe Jesus was crucified, so adding 9 months to that, and viola’! But while a Conception Misconception is great word play, it seems one of the least supportable and most awkwardly personal solutions out there. One clue we do have: shepherds were watching over their flocks in the hills surrounding Bethlehem. That seems to indicate a Spring birth. One thing we know for sure—we’ve settled on December 25th to commemorate His birth, not because we believe He was born on that day, and there’s nothing wrong with that.

2) There was no room for them in the Inn. O.o

For years I have championed the poor innkeeper who has been so reviled. “*What kind of monster could turn away a poor woman in labor!??*” But wait, says I, the innkeeper was likely only protecting the couple from an indelicate situation, and offered a much better alternative! You see, a first-century ‘inn’ was not a Holiday Inn Express. You were much more likely to find a building with a large open space where you could lay down a blanket and sleep on the ground, just like all the other people in the room that you’re meeting for the first time. I’ve never been a pregnant woman, never even played one on TV, but I have been familiar enough with the condition

to believe that very few would choose to deliver their child in a crowded room surrounded by strangers.

But this year going through **Kenneth E. Bailey's** book, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, I uncovered the near-irrefutable idea that there was never an innkeeper at all! Could the old songs have lied to us? In Luke's account we learn that there was no room for the couple in the Inn, but when we get specific to the original Greek language here, there was actually no room for them in the **kataluma**. A *kataluma*, on the other hand, was used when referring to, literally, **a place to stay**. It can, in theory, refer to lodging at an inn, but much more often refers simply to a private house or **guest room** where one is staying. In fact, Luke also used *kataluma* in chapter 22 where Jesus tells his disciples, "Go into the city and meet a man, and ask "Where is the *kataluma* where we are to eat the Passover?" He will show you a large upper room, furnished." In this instance it clearly means a space or guest room in a private home. The Greek word for a commercial inn was **pandocheion**. This was the word used in the story of the Good Samaritan, who put the injured man up in a lodging establishment for treatment. It's use was so well-known and specific that the word was adopted by several other languages of the day.

Slide: 1st Century Home Illustration

This will give you an idea of what a home might look like around the time of Jesus' birth. You can see a basic living area as well as an upper level. Generally the rooftop was also used as a living & working space, much as we might use a deck. A guest room might be tucked in the back, or it might actually be an upper room, almost like building a tiny house on top of your home.

Now, factor into this a relatively new idea: Why is Joseph returning to Bethlehem? Because he is of the house and line of David; he is of the royal line! In the Middle Eastern culture of that day, **any** person passing through might stop in the center of town and be invited by a stranger to come spend the night at their home. But when you are King David's blood, in the city of David, you have your pick of homes! People are fighting over who

gets to host you, even if it means putting their own family out for the night. Beyond that, it is highly likely that Joseph would still have family contacts in the city. Add into it all that in a culture as incredibly serious where hospitality is concerned that we have a woman who is quite obviously well along in a pregnancy... We can be guaranteed that there was no brute innkeeper turning the poor family away! Which leads us to #3...

3) Jesus was born in a stable. o.0

The idea of a stable exists because in our Western culture the only place it makes sense to find a feeding trough for animals is in a barn, therefore in our minds manger = barn, right? Only thing is, we're not in the West for this story.

Slide: kataluma blueprint

Again, the common blueprint for a basic house in biblical times might be simply two rooms, a main family room where everyone cooked, ate & slept, and a guest room which might be a tiny room in the back or a "upper room" on the roof. Besides that, there was a lower area in the front of the house where you would bring in your animals at night for protection against theft, and, in cold weather, to help heat the house. That area was usually a few steps lower than the rest of the house, and would also be where the manger was, almost always carved out of stone. Why? So your livestock wouldn't knock it over every day.

And to be fair, we don't have anything to give us the idea that Mary arrived in town and immediately went into labor. We just know that while she was in Bethlehem, the time came for her son to be born. They most likely had plenty of time to find other arrangements if they felt their current ones were not up to par. Yet we've bought into this idea that this was an emergency situation, and the best idea anyone in the crowd could come up with was to chuck the screaming preggers lady into a barn and close the door. **Everyone good with that idea? Anyone got a better idea? No? No? No? Cool.**

The language of the passage can also indicate, not that there was no room for the couple in the house, but that Joseph & Mary DID stay in the

kataluma, but that there was not room there to deliver a child. I know you're thinking Guest Room or Bonus Room, Maury & Williamson County style. You need to be thinking Closet. You need to be thinking Mary in labor surrounded by every woman in the house, if not the local midwife, IN that closet! And suddenly "There was no room in the kataluma" becomes crystal clear!

SO, if we can lose the idea of a crowded hotel, of an irate innkeeper with no heart, of a thoughtless husband who can't make travel arrangements for his pregnant wife, of a drafty barn as a desperate, last-minute refuge, what we find is this:

Joseph & Mary traveled to Bethlehem to stay with friends/family for the duration of the census. Joseph, because of his family tree, was an honored guest there! During the course of their stay there, Mary went into labor. Instead of delivering in the tiny guest room, their hostess shooed all the men folk out of the lower part of the home where it was quieter, warmer, and they had room to maneuver. After Jesus was born they wrapped him up snugly and put him on a bed of clean hay in the stone manger, where he was safe and secure.

It's amazing how much more can be revealed about this story. More about shepherds, more about angels, more about wise men. WISE MEN?! Don't even get me started! But you know what dawned on me for the first time ever during my research this year? You want to know what hit me in the gut unexpectedly about the little family that ended up so far from home when they welcomed God's Son into the world? (looks at time, considers thoughtfully...) Nah, I'd better not tell you. We'd be here all day. Plus... minds blown... possible damage to the furniture... Guess you'll have to check in with me after the service.

Why do I bother with all of this? Because this is NOT a fairytale. This is NOT a legend. This is a well-documented series of historical events that help establish that the child born to Joseph & Mary, who was named Jesus, met all the prophesied qualifications for identifying the foretold Messiah that God would send. The book we know as the Bible and credit with being God's Word was

written in a period of time spanning over 2000 years, by writers who lived in three different continents, who wrote in three different languages. And despite all of that, the promise of a Messiah, with over 300 prophecies made prior to his birth, prophecies that were as specific as to name the place of His birth and picture the manner of His death, remains the central theme throughout.

This story is not a story of wishes and dreams, of fantasy and make-believe. This story is of meat and bone, fire and water, dirt and sky, love and need, oath and sacrifice. More importantly it is the account of sin, grace, forgiveness, restoration, obedience, hope, purpose, and future.

It is no accident that God sent the Messiah wrapped in a story that many would find difficult to believe! That is the kind of a story that is destined to be told and retold, and told over again. And that's the other reason I present this to you today.

This is a story that moves people. It moved Joseph & Mary. It moved the shepherds. It moved the wise men. It moved Herod's execution squads. It moved Joseph & Mary a second time, along with the baby Jesus.

What we must never forget, at any cost, is that this story that began thousands of years ago has now incorporated... YOU. You are now a mention in the table of contents. You are a player in the cast of characters. You are written into God's story as a bright spot, as the successful Prodigal, as the one in 99 that was lost but is now found! You are part of the happy ending! You followers of God, repentant of sin, forgiven and washed clean in the waters of baptism, you who are now aimed toward your Eternity in Heaven are what puts the Happily in God's Happily Ever After!

Do you know why we don't travel to pay honor in the city of Bethlehem every year? Because **our Sacred Story** is more important than **some Sacred Spot**. Our History is **HIS STORY**.

Do you remember, those of you who went through the Rooted study with us this Fall, do you remember the feeling of sharing your story? Of hearing everyone else's story? I can't imagine how you could have missed it. So many unique twists in each account of finding your way to God.

In 2nd Corinthians 3 Paul wrote this to the believers in the Church in Corinth:

“You yourselves are our letter, written on our hearts known and read by everyone. You show that you are a letter from Christ, the result of our ministry, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.

2 Corinthians 3:2-3

There is a reason that God’s master plan is to put the power on His story into the hands and onto the hearts of His people. YOU are the Cliffhanger! YOU are the unlikely Hero! YOU are The One who will speak into someone’s life and change it for eternity!

Will you share the Story? You must, for the story that moved you is enough to move the world around you. All you need to do is tell it.

“What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived”^[b]—
the things God has prepared for those who love him—

1 Corinthians 2:9