

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

¹ In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹ But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.



Today we come to the climax of the Christmas story. All of the familiar characters come together in these final scenes, ultimately to pay honor to the Christ child, who was born to us this night. As we prepare to spend this time together, let us pray...

As we begin, we see that a decree has been given - a census must be taken, gathering the data needed to plan and budget. To know how many heads there are means to know how much tax revenue can be generated. Like many others, Mary and Joseph must begin the trek too, traveling from the small village of Nazareth to the city of Bethlehem, Joseph's city of origin. This 90-mile journey on foot probably took about 4 days – that is if the very pregnant Mary was able to travel for 8 hours a day. Usually at the ninth month of pregnancy doctors advise their pregnant patients not to fly or travel, let alone travel by donkey over rocky-terrain to a far-away city.



Soon after arriving, we learn that *“the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.”*

“The time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger.”

- Luke 1:6-7



The baby Jesus was laid in a manger because the city was full of people who had come to be counted in the census. It is likely that the “*inn*” was really a relative’s house. And it is also likely that the “*manger*” was found on the first floor of the relative’s house. It was very common for the dwellings to be two stories with a roof that functioned like a deck. The ground floor was where the animals stayed, while the second floor held the family’s second floor dwelling space.



The
Foggy
Fringe

As we continue into verses 8 and 9, we meet the next groups of characters. These characters are out on the foggy fringe, so to speak. They are shepherds who are “*living out in the fields*”

as they tend their sheep. Being a shepherd was a low-paying, non-glamorous, bottom end of the pay scale, 24/7 kind of job. Shepherds stayed with the flock all the time when they were on duty. The wolves and other predators did not clock out at 4 PM. The shepherds lived and slept outdoors, right alongside the sheep. In the evenings most shepherds used some type of pen to hold the sheep, enabling the men and women to get at least a little rest. This is likely the scenario when “*the angel of the Lord appeared to them,*” causing the shepherds to be “*terrified.*”

The angel delivers this message: “*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.” This was a pretty radical event and message. First, the good news is brought to folks who are generally looked down upon and are shunned for being ceremonially unclean – never mind that living outdoors 24/7 thing. Second, it is great news of great joy for all people. Not some, not most, all people.

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I am bringing you good
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people: to you is born this
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Messiah, the Lord.”
- Luke 1:10-11



All people meant the shepherds, for sure. But it also meant the Samaritans and the lepers and the blind, deaf, and/or mute and the tax collectors and the prostitutes and the demon possessed and... Well, you get the picture – those who lived on the foggy fringes of society and of Jewish religion. Even at his birth, Jesus is revealing God's heart for the outcasts, the lowly, the marginalized, the ignored, the less than.

It is great news because the Savior, the Messiah, he is the one who will offer to redeem Israel and who will offer to redeem all people. Jesus the Messiah is the one who offers to redeem you and me. The one who comes tonight, as a vulnerable and helpless baby, will one day grow up to reveal God's unconditional love for humanity.

The story of Jesus' birth does not take place in the center of the action, in a palace or other place of power. The one born king of the Jews comes into the world in a most simple fashion, born in a manger and wrapped in bands of cloth. In this sense, it happens out on the foggy fringe. If you live around here, you are probably familiar with the Tilford triangle. It is a magnet for weather of all kinds. Occasionally



a dense fog will settle in and hang around. The fog can be quite thick, enveloping everything that comes within, creeping into every crevice and cavity that it can find. Now, if the fog remains a long time, and you are in that fog, eventually you might wonder if the sun is still shining. Like in this picture, pretty soon the outer edges of the world begin to become blurred out.

It is quite a sight to see the fog settled down, onto, into, and over an area. You have to move out past the fringes of the fog to really see it. If you were to hike up out of the valley that lines the Tilford triangle, you would get a perspective like this one. On the fringes you capture a whole new perspective. Maybe that is why the Christmas story and all of faith, for that matter, seeks to move us out to the fringes. There we can get a new perspective on the birth of the Christ child. Being born on the outskirts gives us a glimpse into the who, what, where, and how of Jesus' life and his ministry. That is what really matters about his birth, you know – his ministry.



Jesus ministered most often out on the fringes. Yes, he often spent time on the Sabbath in the temple or local synagogues. Jesus worshipped and taught in these faith centers on a

regular basis. But the majority of his ministry, the part of his life that applies to you and to me, that part was spent out in the villages and towns, out on the byways and highways, by the seashore and on the hillside. This is where Jesus met the ordinary people of everyday life. This is where Jesus welcomed people in, where he met needs that came before him, where he shared life with people who were suffering or struggling or hurting. It is where we are called to live out our faith too.

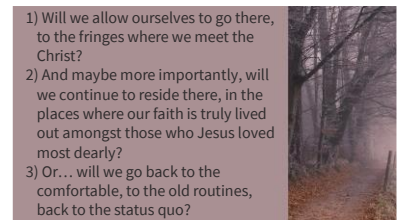
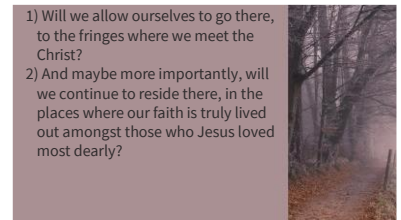
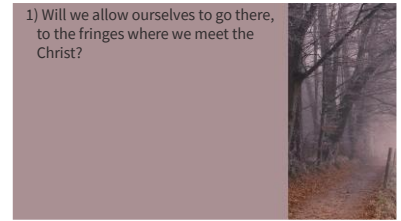
Admittedly, being out on the fringes can bring us beyond our comfort zones. Being out in the world as Jesus was out in the world will put us in places and with people who are not just like us. Truth be told, though, that is where Jesus found me. Maybe the same is true for some of you. In a time of pain and grief, Jesus surrounded me with his peace and covered me with his love. This love is the heart of God's message through Jesus.

His love drew me into a personal relationship. His love continues to keep me in that relationship. In our culture today, we are taught to be transactional. Our jobs, our commitments, our interactions – they can become transactions. ‘What is in it for me?’ can be a guiding question in this transactional lifestyle. Along with the ‘if you scratch my back, then I’ll scratch yours’ mentality, this lifestyle can sometimes bleed into our beliefs, leading us to think that we can earn our way into heaven or into God answering our prayers the way we want them answered. Living as Jesus lived, however, is not about transactions or earning anything. Living as Jesus lived grounds itself the Christmas narrative and in the heart of God’s message as revealed through Jesus’ life and death.

In the Christmas narrative, God left heaven and took on flesh, becoming like us so that we could become like him. In the incarnation, God chose to give up glory and to surrender power and might to live as a humble servant, offering us an example of what it looks like to truly love God and neighbor with all that we are. It is when we come to receive and understand the depth of this love that we begin to live as people who desire to share this love with others. This relational nature of our relationship with God is what empowers us to love both God and all people with all of our hearts.

As we draw to a close of this portion of our time together, as we spend this time in the presence of God and one another, as we hear the word proclaimed and as we sing the songs of Christmas, perhaps we too are being pulled to the fringe. For some of us, this is drawing us to the edge of our comfort zones. In closing, a few questions:

- 1) Will we allow ourselves to go there, to the fringes where we meet the Christ?...
- 2) And maybe more importantly, will we continue to reside there, in the places where our faith is truly lived out amongst those who Jesus loved most dearly?...
- 3) Or... will we go back to the comfortable, to the old routines, back to the status quo?...



Thank you for this time together. May the Lord our God bless you and your families.
Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. What might be keeping you from going to the fringes of society? How can other people of faith help you to take those steps?
- 2) *Pray*. As you consider those on the fringes, who in your life can you pray for this week, asking God to draw them in?
- 3) *Study*. Read Matthew 4:1-11. How does this experience of Jesus allow him to go to the fringes or edges of life with us and with those who are there right now?