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Nativity of the Lord

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Nativity of the Lord

Isaiah 9:2–7; Psalm 96; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 2:1–20

CAN YOU IMAGINE the feelings of Mary and Joseph, forced by a foreign government to travel a hundred miles for a census in the midst of winter, when Mary is about to give birth?

We might imagine Mary riding on a donkey, but the text does not say so. However they traveled, it must have been a rough trip, topped off by bedding down with the animals in a feeding trough. Alas, the inns and guesthouses were full. The travelers must have been exhausted.

Our hearts go out to migrants and refugees in our own day, as so many of them find themselves in a terrible situation. Their stories and ours are prefigured time and again in the Bible.

Imagine Abraham, called by God to take all of his family and servants and possessions to a faraway place, with the promise of being a blessing to the world. Later, Joseph and his brothers find economic refuge in Egypt—but when the Israelites are liberated from Egypt, they once again become refugees, camping out in the wilderness for 38 years as they seek the promised land.

After settling, the Israelites experience two huge waves of invasion and deportations, by the Assyrians and then the Babylonians. As Amos warns, the people are dragged off with hooks.

Nonetheless, the prophetic hope articulated in Isaiah provides a promise that people can hold onto, even in the darkest of times: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness on them light has shined.”

Indeed, God protects King Hezekiah and the people of Jerusalem when Sennacherib claims to be holding them captive like a bird in a cage; God delivers the Hebrew children from the fiery furnace and Daniel from the lion’s den; God even uses the Persian king Cyrus to liberate the Jews from their Babylonian

exile, allowing them to return to their homeland and rebuild the temple. The God of Israel is known and loved for setting captive peoples free.

This is why the psalmist continually exhorts worshipers to sing a new song unto the Lord for his graciousness and provision. And this is precisely what the angels do in the fields near Bethlehem, celebrating God’s breaking into human history in the birth of the Christ Child. Not only does Israel’s God shine a great light of hope among refugees in strange lands, but the shepherds near Bethlehem are abruptly

startled by an angel of the Lord—surrounded by glory—sending them into town to behold Israel’s Savior-Messiah.

While Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth tells of royal stargazers from afar, bringing costly gifts to the Christ Child, Luke’s story features angels appearing to common shepherds, the lowly of the land, coming to see Jesus. Thus, another theme in Isaiah 9 is seen by Luke to have been fulfilled by the angels (v. 6): “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

As we reflect upon the meaning of Christmas for us this year—with the story so familiar to us—we’re reminded that the God of exiles, refugees, and migrants still shines light amid today’s present darkness. Peace on earth is what the Christ Child came to bring, and God’s favor extends beyond human bounds and measures.

Commenting on the meaning and significance of God’s reconciling the world in Christ, the author of Titus references the appearance of God’s grace as a person—one who gave himself for us that we might be redeemed—leading believers to be zealous for good deeds. In that sense, the ways we respond to the birth of Christ with our changed and changing lives determine whether nativity is seen as a blessing to the world or something less.

For exiles and displaced travelers, Jesus is present as a delivering hope; for common laborers and animal tenders in the field, glorious choruses of angels appear; and for the divisions and challenges of our day, Christ is a Wonderful Counselor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.

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