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The Journey that Changed the World

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Christmas Eve

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But when the kindness and love of God our Savior appeared, he saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and renewal by the Holy Spirit, whom he poured out on us generously through Jesus Christ our Savior, so that, having been justified by his grace, we might become heirs having the hope of eternal life.

Titus 3:4–7

The Journey That Changed the World

It's Christmas Eve—probably the most sacred evening of the year for most Christian families around the world—but how do you celebrate this day in your own home? Have you been working nonstop getting food together and the home ready for family time, or getting last-minute presents wrapped and under the tree? Or, have you been traveling to be with loved ones or striving to get to a Christmas Eve worship service on time? The challenge is to work through the busyness of the day to engage meaningfully in its central business—the celebration of Jesus' birth.

As we think of Mary and Joseph two millennia ago, they, too, were pressed from all sides. Luke explained in real historical context that their visit to Jerusalem was a factor of an earlier census and the later tax measures issued by the ruler of the day.
It reminds us that their lives, like ours, were full of pressures and cares.

These things help us understand more about the pressure that Joseph must have felt as he traveled that confusing and lonely journey. First, the wealth of Herod Archelaus (son of Herod the Great—banished because of his harsh crackdown on Jewish uprisings) was confiscated and used to support the Roman occupation of the region. Second, livestock and produce collections were replaced by the garnering of hard currency, making it much harder for farmers and herders to make their payments. This caused an uprising by Judas the Galilean—declaring that this new system of taxation amounted to enslavement, and the Romans stepped in and crucified two thousand Jewish men near Nazareth. Third, registering the populace allowed Romans to keep especially close track of leading men in society; later Roman authorities put to death known descendants of David so as to avert messianic uprisings.

In addition to feeling the oppression of Roman rule, with Mary's being pregnant and with no place to stay, the young couple must have felt terribly discouraged! But notice how things changed in the rest of Luke's story. First, a place of hospitality was provided, though modest and among the animals. Second, heavenly angels appeared to shepherds—the common folk of the land—connecting the lowly with the royal. Third, in worshiping the Christ-child, the chorus of the angels became the passion of the shepherds, too: “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests” (Luke 2:14).

We are reminded through the realities of the pressures and challenges that Mary and Joseph felt on that Christmas Eve journey that God's purpose and plans are established in unlikely places and ways. On that first Christmas morn, the royal tent of King David was pitched in an animal shelter, and his inauguration was celebrated by peasants. But long after the rise and fall of the Roman Empire, the reign of the babe in a feeding trough continues. Of his kingdom there is no end, and “having been justified by his grace,” we too become royal “heirs having the hope
of eternal life.” That is great news to celebrate this Christmas Eve, and every day in the year to come!

_Blessed Lord, thank you for the gift of knowing about this journey that changes everything. We thank you for the courage of Joseph, the faith of Mary, and the grace of hospitality of the manger. This Christmas Eve, may we be assured of your companionship on the journey we are on. Amen._

Paul N. Anderson is a professor of biblical and Quaker studies at George Fox University in Newberg, Oregon, where he lives.