

By Patty Friesen based on a sermon by Patrick Preheim:)

My hope for this New Year's Eve sermon is that we come to understand that Jesus was born into community. Our birth as humans and as Christians happens among a people. Our physical and spiritual journeys are not in isolation. Yes, we have aspects of our growth that are forged on our own, but most of our life is aided by community.<sup>1</sup> It is true for the child we have come to call the Christ and true for us.

The traditional events of the Christmas story that we've heard these past weeks are well known to all Christians; the birth of Jesus as a baby born in a stable because there was "no room in the inn." This makes Christ's birth feel very isolated – like a lone ranger hero and the Holy Family – Mary, Joseph and Jesus as a tiny nuclear family alone in the world. But archeology and contextual studies offer a very different scene for the birth of the Messiah. These differences have implications for how we view our journey of faith in our 21<sup>st</sup> century faith communities.

First of all, Mary and Joseph did not stay in a cave or stable. Joseph was returning to the village of his origin. In the Middle East, historical memories are long, and the extended family, with its connection to its village of origin, is important. In such a world a man like Joseph would have appeared in Bethlehem, and told people, "I am Joseph, son of Heli, son of Matthar, the son of Levi" and most homes in town would be

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bohoeffter and Martin Luther in *A Guide to Prayer*; edited by Reuben P. Job and Norman Shawchuck (Nashville, TN: The Upper room, 1983), pp. 179-180.

open to him, particularly since Joseph was a “royal”; that is, he was from the family of King David. Being from that famous ancestral family, Joseph would have been welcome anywhere in town. Joseph returning to Bethlehem would be like a Buhler or a Boldt returning to their ancestral home in Osler - most homes in town would be open - or maybe in Osler, there might be a mob with pitchforks:)

But homes in Bethlehem would be open to Joseph and Mary, particularly since Mary was seriously pregnant. In every culture a woman about to give birth is given special attention. Simple rural communities the world over always assist one of their own women in childbirth regardless of the circumstances. Are we to imagine that Bethlehem was an exception? Was there no sense of honour in Bethlehem? Surely the community would have sensed its responsibility to help Joseph find adequate shelter for Mary and provide the care she needed. To turn away a descendent of David in the “City of David” would be an unspeakable shame on the entire village.

For the Western mind the word manger evokes the words stable or barn. But in traditional Middle Eastern villages this is not the case. Sure, the wealthy might have detached granaries or storage units (see Luke 12:13-21), but simple village homes in Palestine often had only two rooms. The main room was a family room where the entire family cooked, ate, slept and lived. The second was exclusively for guests; and it might have been on the roof, as in the story of Elijah (1 Kings 17:19), or possibly a room built alongside the main space. At the far end of the main room was a section a few feet lower than the big area fenced off by heavy timbers; that area was for the animals. This arrangement of sleeping near the animals should not surprise students of history. Through the centuries home construction in agrarian communities have often found

ways of bringing the animals into the house at night. The Mennonite villages in Russia were no different.

Why bring the beasts inside? The animals produce heat which makes the humans more comfortable; almost like a portable space heater. The animals produce a ready source of heating fuel. Finally, it is much more difficult for wolves, coyotes, and thieves to make a steal. The mangers, then, were in the fenced space between family room and animals. To feed the animals was nothing more than going across the living room and dropping in some hay. When Mary lays baby Jesus in a manger it is a matter of her placing the child on a comfy bed of straw in a space warmed by animals within the house not far from where she will be sleeping.

So, there was no space in the guest room so Mary stayed in the big family room. Jesus was birthed in the family room. If tradition serves as a guiding light, Mary was surrounded by mid-wives, elders, and caring neighbours. The men were likely sequestered to a separate space, maybe even the guest room. The upshot is that Jesus was born in a home which had some configuration of family and guests and animals living in it. Joseph had men with which to visit during the birthing process and Mary had womanly companions, and animals at the far end of the room to keep her warm. The point of all this is that we make our journeys on our own, but we are not alone. Christ is not part of a small nuclear family whom shepherds and magi - strangers come to visit one time. Christ is born connected to midwives and relatives and indeed the whole village would come out to celebrate his birth, even as the town of Bethlehem came out for Ruth's baby Obed when he was born in Ruth chapter 4.

Joseph had time to make adequate arrangements with midwives for Mary's birth. Luke 2:4 says that Joseph and Mary "went up from Galilee to Judea" and verse 6 states "while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered". The average Christian thinks that Jesus was born the same night the holy family arrived—hence Joseph's haste and willingness to accept any shelter, even the shelter of a stable. Classic Christmas pageants reinforce this idea year after year because it makes good theatre, yet Mary, Joseph and the baby would have had plenty of time and a decent place to stay by 1<sup>st</sup> century standards.

If Joseph and Mary were taken into a private home and at birth Jesus was placed in a manger in that home, how is the word *inn* in Luke 2:7 to be understood? Within Greek we have a word for a commercial inn which is *pandocheion*. For example, when the Good Samaritan picks up the battered traveler, she takes them to a *pandocheion*--literally translated as "pan" (all) and "docheion" (receive); the place where all are received - a hotel. But in Luke 2:7 we have a *katalyma*, which literally translated is "a guest room." Luke uses this word elsewhere in the gospels. The upper room is a guest room that Jesus requests for the last supper. I find it poetic that Jesus begins his life in a guest room surrounded community and offers his final blessings at the last supper to his community in a guest room.

All this is important because if we see Christ as an individual being, alone with his parents because they don't need any one else – we may think our faith is also a lone venture – just us and Jesus – that's all we need. The truth of the matter is that we need community as well – broken and imperfect as we are.

A generation ago, or so, Stuart Murray introduced Mennonites to the concept of belief, belonging and behaviour.<sup>2</sup> People come to be part of our faith communities in a variety of ways. Some come to meet Christ out of a sense of belonging with a Mennonite people. Some come to meet Christ because of beliefs and convictions they have come to from camp or reading. Some come to meet Christ through the actions and service of a community. Each avenue of entry permits others to join in. Christ is born in community, so let us be mindful of the various ways a community can create space to meet the Christ child.

Let us continue to gather for worship. The songs we sing and the scriptures we read and the conversations we have ground our convictions about God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. **Believing** is one way we meet Christ.

Let us continue to gather for fellowship. For many, seeing people and singing and socializing is the reason for coming to church. **Belonging** is another way we meet Christ.

Let us also continue to gather to practice good behaviour in service and learning from others. Be it in ushering, worship leading, making MCC blankets, serving at Friendship Inn, serving on boards, reading or being challenged by a speaker at faspas and conversation—learning and service and **behaviour** is yet another way we meet Christ.

In this New Year 2024, the 499th year of Anabaptism, Luke and I will be preaching on believing, belonging and behaving as Anabaptists who value our history –

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<sup>2</sup> <https://amnetwork.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/Church-After-Christendom-Chapter-1.pdf>

always doing a check at it in the rear view mirror while looking ahead through the windshield of the future. Our spiritual history surely shapes us but let it not bind us. We will also be looking at our church's purpose statement from 20 years ago which is still quite good but which we may want to tweak a bit in our 96th. I've titled our 2024 theme - Let's Explore in '24 – or Growing in Grace - past, present and future.

We give birth to Christ in community – and in this spirit we welcome 2024 with Christ among us with communion. All who desire Christ to be born in and among us - please partake. After the hymn - deacons please come forward as we pray through the litany and serve Edna's fresh homemade gluten-free bread and grape juice. Let us sing.

Benediction: Jesus, your coming is still miraculous. Your joining the family of the poor and displaced still boggles and convicts us. Keep us by your manger until we learn the way of love. Amen.