HOME FOR CHRISTMAS

**A BARN IN THE FIELD, Luke 2:1-8**

**And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.**

**2(And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)**

**3And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city.**

**4And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:)**

**5To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.**

**6And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered.**

**7And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.**

**8 And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the fields keeping watch over their flock by night.**

INTRO: I hope that you are going to be “home for Christmas” if that is your choice. The song says, “I’ll be home for Christmas…if only in my dreams.” The song was written in 1943 and performed by my distant cousin, Bing Crosby, in honor of the troops who were in far distant lands fighting in World War II.

 We dream about home—about good times with family in days gone by. Home is where the heart is, someone said, and that expresses a sentiment that prevails in many of our hearts.

 I mentioned the City of David last week in connection with moving the Ark of the Covenant. I mentioned that a portion of the city of Jerusalem is referred to by some as “the city of David” and is being excavated as such.

 However, seven miles southeast of Jerusalem lies Bethlehem which is called here “the city of David.” In fact, David was from Bethlehem. He was in the fields of Bethlehem watching the flocks when the prophet Samuel called for him to appear before him.

 The fields are rocky, uneven, with pits and caves everywhere. Mary and Joseph traveled through these fields on their way to the hamlet of Bethlehem hoping to find a place to stay.

(Insert pic of fields of Bethlehem).

 Curiously, these fields played a major part in the birth of the Son of David, the Messiah, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus was born in the very place where David lived. David was a shepherd, and Jesus was born in the place where sheep were fed and sheltered.

 He was called “Jesus of Nazareth” because he grew up in Nazareth. Like many of us, Jesus moved around some. He began in Bethlehem. The family was then forced to flee to Egypt. They settled back in Nazareth. Nazareth is apparently where Mary and Joseph lived when Mary received the angel’s announcement. They made their trip to Bethlehem from Nazareth. Nazareth may have been the home town of Mary or Joseph.

 The name “Jesus” was fairly common in Israel in the first century. Adding the place, Nazareth, to the name Jesus distinguished Jesus from others who had the same name.

 We will return to Nazareth as we move through Advent. Today I want to make a few observations about the first accommodations and shelter that Jesus of Nazareth found in this world.

 **The crèche is the most common religious symbol of Christmas**. It is omnipresent in our culture, easily recognized by much of the world. If you see a few robed figures with crooked staffs standing around a wooden bin of hay with a baby in it, you know that this baby is Jesus at his birth.

 The Messiah’s entrance into this world occurred in a stable, a barn. Let’s reflect on this astonishing truth for just a minute. When I look at the crèche, I see:

**I. I see TRANSITION.** This should encourage us in a number of ways.

 A. Baby Jesus had to make do in temporary quarters when he first arrived. He did not have the crib room with all the baby supplies set up and ready for him.

 B. Whenever we are in a temporary living situation, we should remember that Jesus

 C. Jesus would remain itinerant and in transition throughout his life. He did not really have a home, it seems. He said at one point that he “Foxes have holes, and birds have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head” (Matthew 8:20).

 D. A body of flesh is a transitional tent, a tabernacle. When God became flesh, it was a temporary thing, this incarnation. “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God,” Paul declared (1 Corinthians 15:50). This was true for Jesus as well. He was fully human with a body built for this world. But he was only here for 33 years.

**II. I see SIMPLICITY.** This also should encourage us.

 A. The crèche is distinguished by its lack of the unnecessary, the decorative. There is usually little or no finished carpentry in a barn. The Accommodations are basic.

 B. There really is no furniture. The manger is not a piece of furniture. They are sitting on the ground. They are eating with food in their laps. They are resting on pallets, probably in the hay. They are making do with very little.

 C. Some might call this poverty. There are no brightly colored presents for baby Jesus or his parents on that first Christmas. The crèche is pretty stark. The manger substitutes for a crib. the hay for a mattress.

 D. Simplicity is actually a great quality. We look for it in many ways. It would be a great quality to inject into our homes this Christmas. Maybe we are better off to cultivate the simple interactions of loved ones with the more complicated trips and excursions that too often leave us exhausted, ruffled, and broke.

 1. We can clean together. Homes always need cleaning. Children can help. Dishes need done.

 2. We can cook together. Everyone loves to eat. So let’s express this by teaching in the kitchen, helping, enjoying one another as we do so.

 3. We can play games together. There are puzzles, and board games, and table games and card games that are simple glue for any family.

**III. I see FAMILY.** The first thing you see outside of the baby in the manger is Mary, his mother, looking into his face, and Joseph, standing protectively near.

 A. The HOLY FAMILY is the only certain part of this scene. The shepherds came in, probably briefly, although some may have stayed to help with provisions and errands. The angels were in the sky. The Wise Men we will talk about next week when we look at the house that Mary and Joseph decided to occupy in Bethlehem.

 B. This family is blended.

 C. Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus. He is a step-father, as we would call him. He is older, we are pretty certain, and he may have had children from a previous marriage, though that is speculation. He will disappear from the family portraits sometime after Jesus turns 12 years old. He will not live to his son’s 30th birthday.

 D. Mary is very young—maybe in her mid-teens. This would have been normal in that culture. Tradition says that she came from a prominent priestly family in Sepphoris, not far from Nazareth. I don’t know if this is so. Her parents are known in tradition as Joachim and Anne. In fact, there is a church built to honor St. Anne in the old city of Jerusalem. Traditions indicate that Joseph was a poor carpenter while Mary was from a wealthy and influential family. Maybe her parents were not thrilled that she chose to marry an uneducated man. We do not know.

 One thing we know for sure is that there were family dynamics that worked for and against this married couple, as with almost everyone. Parents approved and disapproved. Extended family helped and criticized. We may surmise that Mary and Joseph did not find their parents to be their finest friends. Mary chooses to spend three months with Elizabeth, her cousin.

**IV. I see STRANGERS**. The crèche scene normally features some shepherds who came from the fields after hearing the announcement by the angels.

 A. Life is never entirely peopled by folks that we know. We always have some new face in the group, some new name to learn. This is the nature of life on this planet.

 B. People in transition will become acquainted with successive groups of strangers. And they themselves will be strangers, as Mary and Joseph were to these natives of Bethlehem, the shepherds tending the flocks.

 C. Our experience of being strangers should inform our treatment of strangers this holiday season and all year round.

 D. You are likely to have strangers in your photos from the holidays this year. Someone is newly married or remarried. Someone has a friend they brought to the gathering. The family expands.

 1. Receiving strangers into the family is part of the opportunity and responsibility of old-timers. We must open the circle and bring them in.

 2. This is true of your small group, your circle of support and influence. New people need a place. We who remember being strangers should be the first to welcome new people.

CONCLUSION: The crèche is a strange scene, actually, with a stable and hay and a manger and maybe some animals. But it is not so strange upon reflection. For humans connect in the great moments of life. Giving birth is one of those.