

Christmas Eve

THE LOVE OF A CHILD

Luke 2:1-20

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Analysis by Lori A. Cornell

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3All went to their own towns to be registered. 4Joseph 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. 5He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7And 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.

8In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13And 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!"*

15When 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." 16So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. 17When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; 18and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. 19But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. 20The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

DIAGNOSIS: Absentee Landlord

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : *It Could Be Worse*
None of this should sound unfamiliar: A ruler who calls the shots from a distance; a governor who could care less about the subjects he's bossing around. Both of them intent on squeezing the little people of the last pennies in their pockets. And that's not the half of it. Then there are the personal life circumstances to deal with: A tentative couple (she pregnant, the two engaged but not married), burdened by the empire's call to pick up from their home and head south to be counted for the tax. And then, to add insult to injury, no place to stay.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *It Is*
But it could be worse—and it is. This couple didn't end up in this predicament of their own volition. Instead, God put them there: God who by the Holy Spirit caused the unsullied womb of Mary to conceive. God who invited Joseph along for the rocky ride of an illegitimate pregnancy in the midst of an unfinished engagement. And, (nearly as bad), God who allowed such absentee landlords as Augustus and Quirinius to be in charge in the first place.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *Much Worse*

Such hardships can't just be dismissed as poor luck. They raise questions: About God. About faith. About the wisdom of conceding to God's will if it ends up like this. (Maybe Caesar and Quirinius aren't the only "absentee landlords"!) Such speculation just results in more problems—not just us having problems with God, but God having trouble with people like us who question God's judgment.

PROGNOSIS: Christmas Presence

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Love of a Child*

Interesting isn't it, that these are the very circumstances in which God chooses to show up in person? For that is precisely what God does in the birth of his Son Jesus. Some might call this bad timing on God's part—showing up in the midst of tax season, unprepared to obliterate the powers that make life so miserable. But what seems foolish to us, is in truth God's glorious wisdom: To show up in the most adverse of circumstances, at work in the most unlikely candidates, singing good news to the most unworthy of recipients. God shows up weak and vulnerable in the midst of a harsh world. Not only will he surprise us with his unassuming incarnation, but soon enough we will discover that he has come—not to tax our human existence even more—but to bring healing to our burdened souls. For this same child, who needs the love of a human mother and father, gives the love of the Father to the world. Not simply in the gentle innocence of a babe, but in the relentless mercy and forgiveness of a grown up Son, who shows ne'er-do-wells the brazen love of the Father, and who receives on the cross the wounded-anger we would just as soon throw back at God. This is the love of the Child—for his Father, for us.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Is the Love of*

Us Children

No wonder the shepherds couldn't wait until daylight to make their way to the manger. No wonder Mary pondered all these things in her heart. This God whom Mary and Joseph, the Shepherds, and we encounter at Bethlehem (and Calvary) is not some absentee landlord. He is truly present. Present in the places we never thought we'd meet him—in our hardships, our sorrows, our suffering, our guilt, our shame, our pride, and our humiliation—to redeem the world.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *And Is Our Love to Share*

And that is news worth pursuing in the dark, and pondering in the light. The love of this Child points us to the love of the Father. And that Father declares to us, that because of his Son we are the Father's children—loved, forgiven, recreated to receive and bear that love to a hostile world. We need not retreat from the world's harsh realities any more than Jesus did. Instead we bear the light of Christ right into the darkness. Remaining present to the world at Christmas, just as the Father did through his Son.