

Christmas Eve

GOD'S HOLIDAY OPEN HOUSE

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Eve

Analysis by Kris Wright

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.

8 In 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: Outside the Inn

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis : *No Inn Room*

The young couple came looking for shelter, a place to rest for a while; she was pregnant, they were unmarried and afraid, but there was no place for them to stay. They came not by their own desire, but by the will of the Caesar. They came to be counted by the government – as if without this census they did not exist. We all know couples like this. Maybe they’ve come from somewhere else to find work that pays. But along the way the money ran out, the car broke down and now here they are sleeping under the steps of the church. They’ve come hoping that here they will count for something. They’ve come, not great with child, but pregnant with the promise of a new life, a promise Isaiah envisions in the lesson for this night. “People like this” come with all kinds of stories, in all shapes, with all kinds of backgrounds, with all kinds of distasteful habits and styles. What do we do with people like this? “Whatever you did (or did not do) for one of the least of these, you did (or did not do) for me” (Matt. 25:40, 45).

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis : *No Heart Room*

The problem lies not with “people like these” but with the “in-

keepers” who stand safely behind the registration desk and set the boundaries, counting to see who measures up; assigning rooms, determining who’s in and who’s out, sitting in judgment to mete out justice according to their own agenda. No love lost there. It’s not that scripture is unclear about God’s will regarding the poor, the lowly, or the despised. We have only to look at Mary’s own song of praise in chapter 1 of Luke’s gospel or the beatitudes in chapter 6 to know where God stands. It is that they are unwilling to trust God, wanting God’s will to reflect their own, his judgment, his justice to reflect theirs. What they want, what they have justified to themselves, what they have fearlessly usurped is the authority that belongs only to God.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis : *No God Room*

So the “in-keepers” stand fearlessly before God, flaunting their power, sometimes even doing it in God’s name. So they stand, naked in their sin, to be judged by God according to the justice they have chosen, and are condemned. Jesus explained the consequence of such lack of compassion this way: “... and these will go away into eternal punishment...” (Matt. 25:46). God slams the door, leaving the in- and out-keepers alone in the dark.

PROGNOSIS: The Emmanuel Inn

Step 4: Initial Prognosis : *God’s Inn*

And yet, there in the eternal darkness, in a barn-amid strange visitors and unpleasant animal smells-a child is born and God’s will is done for the insiders and outsiders alike, for weary travelers and inn-keepers, for shepherds and wise men. This birth has been anticipated for thousands of years, and yet it comes as a surprise announced by angels in a blaze of glory: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people” (v. 10). God gives his very own flesh and blood, born to set his people free from the tyranny of demanding their own will, free

from their sin. A Savior, the Messiah, the Lord laid in a feed trough-a manger in the shadow of the cross, to die and to rise for us, to become the House of Bread (Beth-lehem) and source of Life for us. God, the in-keeper for the world, has thrown open the doors of his kingdom inaugurating a new, indwelling with humanity.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis : *God's Sign Inn*

"Glory to God in the highest and peace among those he favors," we sing with the angels and shepherd (v. 14). God has revealed himself in a new way, with a sign all can recognize – Emmanuel, God is with us. We can trust such a God. In him, we can see a new way for God's will to be done. In him God's judgment and justice are revealed as mercy, and our lost love returns. No measuring up, no counting down, no one left out, this birthday bash is free for all and open to all who by faith receive the invitation signed by God.

Step 6: Final Prognosis : *God's Open Inn*

All former in-keepers are amazed by what they have seen and heard. Will that amazement prompt them to return to their inns, to fling wide their doors (and their budgets) to glorify and praise God with "people like this"? Weary travelers, powerful politicians, those under the steps, those in mansions, and those who smell like shepherds, all are invited and fed with the good news. Jesus' birth makes "people like this" our people, our brothers and sisters, and we all count in God's new kingdom. To one and all we proclaim the good news of great joy – Jesus Christ is born for you!