

Christ the Savior Is Born

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With Christmas only a fortnight away, thoughts turn to our homes and families. Sister Nelson and I enjoy many Christmas traditions. On our mantle over the fireplace we display a small framed photograph of each member of the family. With 10 children, their spouses, and 54 grandchildren, that's quite a flock of photos. We have been doing this for so long that most of the pictures are no longer current. The children scramble to find their own pictures among the many.

They also admire Sister Nelson's large assortment of dolls collected from various countries throughout the world. Those dolls are nestled among the branches of our Christmas tree. Her cookies, cakes, and candies are always in great demand. And we love to read scriptures of the Christmas story with our family.

Through all of our various Christmas traditions, I hope that we are focused first upon the Lord Jesus Christ. Wise men still adore Him. At this special devotional, many of you have come with a prayer in your hearts that you may learn from one of the Twelve Apostles more about our Lord and Master.

We commemorate His humble birth at this time of year, even though we know it did not occur in December but more likely in April. Scriptures declare that His mother, Mary,

was espoused to Joseph. They had participated in the first of two components of a Jewish marriage ceremony. Their espousal might be likened to an engagement in our culture, which is followed later by the second component of a marriage ceremony.

Luke's account records the appearance of the Angel Gabriel to Mary when she first learned of her favored future. I read from chapter 1:

"Hail, thou that art highly favoured . . . : blessed art thou among women. . . .

"And the angel said unto her, Fear not, Mary: for thou hast found favour with God.

"And, behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a son, and shalt call his name JESUS.

"He shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest."¹ (Note the capital S; capital H.)

God is the Highest. Jesus was to be the Son of the Highest.

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“Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?”²
She knew of her virginal status.

“And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God.”³

Before Joseph and Mary came together, she was expecting that holy child. Joseph desired to protect her privacy,⁴ hoping to spare Mary the punishment given to a woman pregnant without a completed marriage. While he pondered these things, the Angel Gabriel appeared to Joseph, saying,

“Joseph, thou son of David, fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife: for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.

“And she shall bring forth a son, and thou shalt call his name JESUS: for he shall save his people from their sins.”⁵

Mary and Joseph did not need to be taught the deep significance of the name *Jesus*. The Hebrew root from which it was derived, *Jehoshua*, means “Jehovah is salvation.” So the mission of Jehovah, soon to be named Jesus, was salvation, and His supreme destiny was to become the Savior of the world.

Let’s turn to the Book of Mormon for the dialogue that Nephi had with an angel as recorded in 1 Nephi 11:

The angel asked: “Knowest thou the condescension of God?”⁶

Nephi replied: “I know that he loveth his children; nevertheless, I do not know the meaning of all things.

“And he said unto me: Behold, the virgin whom thou seest is the mother of the Son of God, after the manner of the flesh.

“. . . I beheld that she was carried away in the Spirit; and after she had been carried away in the Spirit for the space of a time the angel spake unto me, saying: Look!

“And I looked and beheld the virgin again, bearing a child in her arms.

“And the angel said unto me: Behold the Lamb of God, yea, even the Son of the Eternal Father!”⁷

Now let’s turn to the second chapter of Luke—the fond and familiar story that we read at Christmastime:

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed.”⁸

This was really a capitation tax, a census, an enrollment—a registration of the citizenry of the empire of Rome. Herod made a decision that people should be counted in the land of their ancestors. Mary and Joseph, then living in Nazareth, had to travel southward to the city of David, a distance approximately as far as from Salt Lake City to Nephi. Perhaps they traveled even farther if they went around the hostile intermediate province of Samaria. Almost certainly they traveled with relatives who likewise were summoned to the land of their ancestry. This difficult travel was no doubt made with their animals, such as dogs and donkeys. They likely camped out several nights, as three to four days would have been required for that journey.

Verse 7: “And 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.”⁹

Let’s pause to ponder this verse. We need to be aware of the culture of that time and region, and we need to learn one word from the original Greek text. In the Greek New Testament, the root from which *inn* was translated is *kataluma*. We don’t have an equivalent word in the English language. The Greek prefix *kata-* (or *cata-*) means “a bringing down.” We see it in English words such as *catabolism*, *catastrophe*, and *cataclysm*. When the prefix *kata-* was joined with the suffix *-luma*, it meant literally “a breaking down of a journey.” A *kataluma* was a guest chamber in a lodging place.

In those days an inn was not like a Holiday Inn or a Bethlehem Marriott. A lodging place in

that part of Asia had to provide accommodations for traveling caravans, including the people and their animals. Caravans stayed at what was then known (and is still known) as a *caravansary*, or a *khan*. You may look in your own dictionary and find *caravansary* and *khan*, each defined as a rest house in some Asian countries.

Such a facility is typically rectangular in shape. It has a central courtyard for the animals that is surrounded by walled cubicles where the people rest. These quarters allowed guests to be elevated slightly above their animals with open doorways so that owners could watch over their animals.

The Joseph Smith Translation of Luke 2:7 indicates that there was no room for them in the “inns,” suggesting that all of the *katalumas* or cubicles of the *caravansary* were occupied. In the Greek New Testament the word *kataluma* appears in only two other passages,¹⁰ translated in each instance not as “inn” but as a “guestchamber,” which fits the concept that we have discussed.

As a youngster, whenever I heard those words “no room in the inn,” I assumed that No Vacancy signs were posted at local motels or that the innkeepers were inhospitable or even hostile. Such an assumption is probably way off the mark. People of that part of the world were no doubt then as they are now—most hospitable. Particularly would this have been true at a season when the normal population of Jerusalem and neighboring Bethlehem would be swollen with large numbers of relatives.

At a *caravansary*, animals were secured for the night in the center courtyard. In that courtyard there would have been donkeys and dogs, sheep, and possibly camels and oxen, along with all of the animals’ discharges and odors. Because the guest chambers surrounding the courtyard were filled, Joseph possibly made the decision to care for Mary’s delivery in the center courtyard of a *caravansary*—among the animals. There, in that lowly circumstance, the Lamb of God was born.

Why was reference made twice in Luke 2 to His being wrapped in swaddling clothes?¹¹ What is the meaning of those five words “wrapped him in swaddling clothes”? I sense a significance beyond the use of an ordinary diaper and receiving blanket. Instead of those five words in the English text, only one word is needed in the Greek New Testament. That word is *sparganoō*, which means to envelop a newborn child with special cloth, strips of which were passed from side to side.¹² The cloth would probably bear unique family identification. That procedure was especially applicable to the birth of a firstborn son.

You remember the announcement of an angel at the birth of Jesus:

“This shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.”¹³ His wrappings surely would have been distinctive.

I think that such a concept of a cloth with family markings might also have been relevant when Joseph, son of Israel, became the birthright son and received the unique cloth coat of many colors—a fabric symbolic of the birthright.

What about the manger? Those of you who speak French will recognize the word to be the same as the French word *manger*, meaning “to eat.” A manger is a trough or an open box in a stable designed to hold feed, provender, or fodder for animals to eat. Elevated from the floor of the contaminated courtyard, a manger was probably the cleanest site available. Such a feeding trough became the cradle for our Lord!

Now, two millennia later, though we don’t know all the details pertaining to His birth, we certainly understand the unique parentage of this Babe of Bethlehem. Several scriptures ask the question “Who shall declare His generation?”¹⁴ We declare solemnly and with conviction: Jesus was born of an immortal Father and a mortal mother. From His immortal Father, Jesus inherited the power to live forever. From His mortal mother He inherited the fate of physical death.

He declared this reality regarding His own life: “No man taketh it from me,” He said, “but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received of my Father.”¹⁵

Those unique attributes were essential for His mission to atone for the sins of all mankind. Thus Jesus the Christ was born to die.¹⁶ He died that we might live. He was born that all humankind could live beyond the grave.¹⁷ His Atonement was wrought in Gethsemane—where He sweat great drops of blood—and on Golgotha (or Calvary)—where His body was lifted up upon a cross above the place of the skull, which signified death. This infinite Atonement would release man from the infinitude of death.¹⁸ His Atonement made the Resurrection a reality and the gift of eternal life a possibility for all who would obey His teachings. His Atonement became the central act of all human history.

Our recollections of Christmas are enriched by these realities. Each one of us with a testimony of the Lord has the privilege in faith to know of His divine parentage and to testify that Jesus is the Son of the living God.

True testimony includes the fact that the Father and the Son appeared to the Prophet Joseph Smith, whose birth we commemorate on December 23. That testimony includes the fact that The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints is true, led by the living Lord via prophecy and revelation through authorized administrators who receive and respond to direction from Him.

With this background in mind, I share comforting counsel with you today. It comes from section 68 of the Doctrine and Covenants, where we read this commandment from our Master: “Be of good cheer, and do not fear, for I the Lord am with you, and will stand by you; and ye shall bear record of me, even Jesus Christ, that I am the Son of the living God, that I was, that I am, and that I am to come.”¹⁹

Lovingly we cling to that promise. Difficult days are ahead for all mankind. Sin is on the increase. We live in a time of wars and rumors of wars. The Church and its members will come under attack and endure persecution.²⁰

Jesus descended below all things in order to rise above all things. He expects us to follow His example. Yoked with Him, we can rise above all challenges, no matter how difficult they may be.²¹ Peter offered this counsel: “If any man suffer as a Christian, let him not be ashamed; but let him glorify God on this behalf.”²²

The time is coming when those who do *not* obey the Lord will be separated from those who *do*. Our safest insurance is to continue to be worthy of admission to His holy house. How blessed we are to have temples available. The greatest gift you could give to the Lord at this or any other time of year is to keep yourself unspotted from the world, worthy to attend His holy house. His gift to you will be the peace and security of knowing that you are worthy to meet Him, whenever that time shall come.

Brothers and sisters, I plead with you to rise above the tasks of the day and the hurdles ahead. You can do more than the deeds scheduled in your daily planners. You can take the name of the Lord upon you and become more like Him. You can rise to your great potential. You can prepare for the future with greater spiritual capacity.

Remember that the fulness of Christ’s ministry lies in the future. The prophecies of His Second Coming have yet to be fulfilled. At Christmas, of course, we focus upon His birth. But, He will come again. At His First Coming Jesus came almost in secret. Only a few mortals knew of His birth. At His Second Coming the whole of humankind will know of His return. Then He will come, not as “a man traveling on the earth,”²³ but His glory “shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.”²⁴

As a special witness of His holy name, I testify that Jesus is the divine Son of the living

God. He will love you, lift you, and manifest Himself unto you if you will love Him and keep His commandments.²⁵

I express my love and blessing for each of you, along with my best wishes for a very merry Christmas, and do so prayerfully in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Notes

1. Luke 1:28, 30–32.
2. Luke 1:34.
3. Luke 1:35.
4. See Matthew 1:18–19.
5. Matthew 1:20–21.
6. 1 Nephi 11:16.
7. 1 Nephi 11:17–21.
8. Luke 2:1.
9. Luke 2:7.
10. See Mark 14:14 and Luke 22:11.
11. See Luke 2:7, 12.
12. See word number 4683 on page 66 of the Greek Dictionary of the New Testament in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville, New York: Abingdon Press, 1890).
13. Luke 2:12.
14. See Isaiah 53:8; Acts 8:33; Mosiah 14:8; 15:10.
15. John 10:18.
16. See 3 Nephi 27:13–14.
17. See 3 Nephi 27:14–15.
18. See 2 Nephi 9:7.
19. D&C 68:6.
20. See 2 Timothy 3:1–13; D&C 112:24.
21. See Matthew 11:29–30.
22. 1 Peter 4:16.
23. D&C 49:22.
24. Isaiah 40:5; see also D&C 101:23.
25. See John 14:21.