

A Child Is Born

BRUCE D. PORTER

Beloved students, faculty, and friends of Brigham Young University, you are a marvelous sight, and Susan and I are honored and full of gratitude to be with you today. We always feel tender feelings when we return to Brigham Young University, as this is where we met and were engaged. We met in a religion class called Your Religious Problems. I have forgotten many of the details of the class, but I do know that whatever my religious problem was, she solved it, and whatever her problem was, well, I hope I solved it too.

In a very short while your final exams will end and you will return to family or friends for Christmas. In view of the approaching Yuletide season, I have chosen to share with you today a Christmas message, a message of hope and glad tidings, even my assurance and witness of the birth, life, and eternal Lordship of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

More than 700 years before his birth, Isaiah prophesied of Christ in words memorialized by George Frideric Handel in the *Messiah* oratorio:

For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. [Isaiah 9:6]

In this one concise sentence, Isaiah foretold Christ's birth; His Second Coming; His millennial reign; and His eternal mission as the mighty God and Father of our salvation.

Handel's *Messiah* also brought to glorious musical life the following admonition, based on Isaiah:

*O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, . . . O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength: lift it up, be not afraid: say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! [Handel, "O Thou That Tellest Good Tidings to Zion," *Messiah*; see Isaiah 40:9]*

Brothers and sisters, join with me and behold your God! Behold your God, born as a little child in Bethlehem and wrapped in swaddling clothes. Behold your God, born in poverty and simplicity that He might walk among common people as a common man. Behold your God, even the infinite and eternal Redeemer, the Messiah, veiled in flesh

Bruce D. Porter was a member of the First Quorum of the Seventy of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints when this devotional address was given on 9 December 2008.

and come to live upon the very earth that He created.

Return with me to that sacred first Christmas in Bethlehem to contemplate the birth of our Lord. He came in the quiet of the night, in the meridian of time, He who was Immanuel, the Rod of Jesse, the Dayspring, the Key of David, the very Lord of Might. His birth marked the promised visitation of the Creator to earth, the condescension of God to man. As Isaiah wrote of the event:

The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined. [Isaiah 9:2]

We know from modern revelation that Jesus was born on April 6, making it springtime in Judea when the anointed King of Israel came to earth. As Micah had prophesied, he was born in Bethlehem, “little among the thousands of Judah” (Micah 5:2). The village of His birth lay in the shadow of mighty Jerusalem, six miles to the north. Jerusalem was the capital city of Judea, seat of the temple, and bastion of Roman power. Bethlehem, by contrast, was a pastoral town, homespun and agrarian in all its ways. Its only claim to fame was being the birthplace of David—the ancient king of Israel who established the Davidic line through whom Christ would be born; hence the little village was commonly known as the city of David. Its Hebrew name, *bet lehem*, meant “house of bread,” a name that was of no particular significance until He was born who would be known as the Bread of Life.

The fields surrounding Bethlehem were home to numerous flocks of sheep, and the month of April was a traditional birthing season for the ewes of the flock. In their awkward role as midwives to the animals, the shepherds would have stayed up most of the night, laboring beneath the crystal sky of the desert plateau. Hence the angels who heralded

the Lord’s birth would have had no need to wake them.

The boy child who arrived that birthing season was known as the Lamb of God. It is a title of deep significance, for He arrived with the lambs and would someday be “brought as a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7). Yet, paradoxically, He was also the Good Shepherd, one who cared for the lambs. Thus, in a curious way, the twin symbols of His life would represent both those who serve and those who are served. It was only right that Christ should play both roles, for in life He “descended below all things,” and in eternity He “ascended up on high” (D&C 88:6). He is in and through and “round about all things” (D&C 88:41). He knew life from every side and every angle, both above and below. He was the greatest, who made Himself least; the Heavenly Shepherd who became a lamb.

His coming was more than simply the birth of a great prophet, the advent of a promised heir to the royal throne, or even the arrival of the only perfect person who would ever walk the earth. It was all of that, of course, but it was something far more—the coming of the God of heaven “to walk upon his footstool and be like man, almost” (“O God, the Eternal Father,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 175). In the words of a famous carol,

*He came down to earth from heaven,
Who is God and Lord of all.
[“Once in Royal David’s City,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 205]*

Jesus Christ was the Creator of the world and the Great Jehovah of the Old Testament. It was His voice that resounded on Mount Sinai; His power that upheld chosen Israel in its wanderings; His presence revealed to Enoch, to Moses, and to all the prophets who foretold of His coming. And therein lies the greatest miracle of the Nativity: when the God and Creator of heaven and earth first revealed Himself in

person to the world at large, He chose to do so in the form of an infant, helpless and dependent, born in the same manner as any human being was ever born.

An ancient Hebrew tradition held that the Messiah would be born at Passover, and from astronomical calculation we know that April 6 in the meridian of time indeed fell in the week of the Passover feast, that sacred Jewish commemoration of Israel's salvation from the destroying angel that brought death to the firstborn sons of Egypt. It was a salvation granted to each Israelite family that sacrificed a lamb and smeared its blood on the wooden doorposts of their dwelling. Thirty-three years after His Passover birth, Christ's blood would be smeared on the wooden posts of a cross to save His people from the destroying angels of death and sin.

Since Christ's birth took place during the Passover week, that Jewish commemoration may have been the reason why there was no room at the inn—the population of Jerusalem swelled by tens of thousands during Passover, forcing travelers to seek accommodations in outlying towns. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, the home of Joseph's forefathers, to fulfill the requirements of an imperial census ordered by Caesar Augustus. The requirement of the census allowed them to make their appearance in Bethlehem anytime during the year, but they very likely chose the Passover season since it was also a requirement of the Mosaic law for all males to present themselves in Jerusalem at Passover. Since Bethlehem was virtually next door to the Holy City, the couple from Nazareth could take care of two obligations at once.

The innkeeper has come down in history with somewhat of a notorious reputation. Yet given the crowding that took place throughout the region of Jerusalem at Passover, we can hardly blame him for having no room to offer the couple from Nazareth. While the majority of Passover pilgrims camped out in thousands

of goatskin tents pitched on the plains around Jerusalem, thousands of others sought refuge in the local inns, also known as caravansaries or *khans*. The inn in Bethlehem no doubt was overflowing, and the innkeeper's offering of the stable was very likely an act of genuine kindness.

Even had the couple found room in the inn, it would have offered only primitive accommodations: a typical khan of the period was a stone structure consisting of a series of small rooms, each with only three walls and open to public view on one side. Crowded and noisy, the rooms were devoid of furniture, and the khan provided no services. The stable itself was likely a walled courtyard or even a limestone cave where animals belonging to the guests were kept. Whether courtyard, cave, or other refuge, the place of Christ's birth among the animals did have one conspicuous advantage over the crowded interior of the inn: here at least was to be found peace and privacy. In this sense, the offering of the stable was a blessing, allowing the most sacred birth in human history to take place in reverent solitude.

Seven hundred years before that first Christmas, the prophet Isaiah penned a messianic prophecy that the Savior later read to His fellow villagers of Nazareth:

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. [Isaiah 61:1; see Luke 4:18]

When we read of Christ proclaiming "liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound," we probably think first of His ministry in the spirit world among the dead. But listen closely and carefully now, my beloved brothers and sisters, for I want you to not forget what I tell you now: *We are all*

captives, every one of us, and we all have the need to be set free.

- We are all captive to the corruption and weakness of mortal bodies; subject to the temptations of the flesh, to infirmity, and ultimately to death.

- We are captive to sin and to the wages of sin, to guilt and the lonely withdrawal of the Lord's spirit when we disobey.

- We are in bondage to bad habits, indulgences, false ways of thinking, and even sometimes to addictions—both physical and spiritual.

- We are captive to mistakes, errors, and wrong turns taken in the past; to painful memories of precious things lost, time squandered, and regrets of what might have been had we only chosen more wisely.

- We are captive to ignorance and worldly distractions, and hence oblivious to the glory of God that lies all about and around us.

- Finally, all of us in some degree are captives of pride, the greatest prison of all—the most common human sin, that great counterfeit of spiritual strength that substitutes carnal imagination and self-obsession for the true freedom found only in meekness.

Whatever it may be that binds us, whatever sins, circumstances, or past events hold each of us captive, the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Immanuel, has come to set us free. He proclaims liberty to the captives—freedom from the bonds of death and the prison of sin, ignorance, pride, and error. Of Him it was written that He “led captivity captive” (Psalm 68:18); of Him it was prophesied that He shall “say to the prisoners, Go forth” (Isaiah 49:9). The only condition of our freedom is that we come unto

Him with broken hearts and contrite spirits and seek to do His will.

About 30 years ago I met a man who won freedom from spiritual captivity by the redeeming power of Christ. This European man, whom I will call Thomas, was about 45 years old when I met him. Twenty years earlier he had been a young man of 25 when his parents met the missionaries and joined the Church. Thomas, who considered himself an atheist, had no interest in his parents' new religion. But his mother loved him, and she treasured the hope in her heart that someday her son might be brought to know the truth of the restored gospel. As the years passed, his mother tried many times to persuade her son to at least meet with the missionaries and hear their message. He refused again and again, and he mocked his parents for their religious faith.

One day, in desperation, his mother tried a new approach. She said, “Thomas, if you will take the missionary discussions one time, then I will never again talk to you about the Church.” Thomas, tired of his mother's pleadings, decided this was a good bargain. He agreed to meet with the missionaries. The elders who taught him reported that he had no interest at all in the Church and no belief in God. During the first three discussions he simply sat there full of pride, occasionally making fun of what the elders were trying to teach. The only reason they went back was because they knew of his mother's love for him and the agreement between them.

The fourth discussion came, which was then about the Atonement of Christ and the first principles of the gospel. Thomas said nothing at all as they taught him, but they noticed he grew unusually silent and listened closely to the discussion. At the end of the lesson they bore their testimonies of Christ. Thomas simply sat there looking at them, saying nothing. One of the missionaries felt prompted to open his Bible to the Gospel of Matthew and read these words:

Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. [Matthew 11:28–29]

Suddenly, without warning, Thomas burst into tears. He sobbed like a child for the longest time and then said, “Are you trying to say that Christ would forgive *me* of my sins? I have lived a miserable life. I am haunted by the memory of my sins. I would do anything to be freed of the guilt I feel.”

All of his pride had only been a facade that hid a soul captive to sin and guilt.

The elders assured Thomas that Christ would forgive him and free him from the burden of guilt if he would but repent and be baptized. They bore testimony once more to him of the power of Christ’s Atonement. From that moment on, everything changed in the life of Thomas. He had much to repent of and much to overcome, but through the blessings of the Lord, and to the amazement of his mother and father, he was able to qualify for baptism. He became a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

More than 20 years later, I sat in the chapel of the Frankfurt temple waiting for an endowment session to begin. There was a white-haired elderly man sitting in front of me who all at once turned around and said, “Aren’t you Elder Porter?” To my great joy I recognized it was Thomas, still faithful and true in the Church, a man freed from bondage by the power of Jesus Christ.

Perhaps this Christmas season we might each resolve to approach our Father in Heaven humbly in prayer and petition the power of His Beloved Son to be with us in our daily walk and to free us from our own bondages, our own personal forms of captivity, be they great or small.

Now I have had many witnesses in my life of the reality of Jesus Christ as our Lord and

Savior. I will share only one in conclusion. In December 1987, about two weeks before Christmas, I was asked by the federal agency where I worked to go to Israel on government business. I had been to Israel many times before, but never at the Christmas season. Unfortunately it was not a peaceful time in the Holy Land, as the first Palestinian *intifada* had begun—the revolt of the local Arab population against Israeli rule. There were riots in the West Bank, the streets of Old Jerusalem were deserted, and the shops were boarded up. There was political tension in the air, and, to make matters worse, a cold rain drizzled most of the week. The whole city bore a dreary aspect. Fearful of violence, the tourists stayed away in droves that year. Yet as I walked through Jerusalem, peace filled my heart to know that this was the city Christ loved so much; to know that this was the very place of His eternal sacrifice; to know that on these stone streets the Redeemer of all mankind had walked.

I returned to the United States late on a Friday evening, only six days before Christmas. When the Sabbath dawned two days later, my alarm woke me to the music of “O Holy Night,” and I heard these words:

*The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our friend.
[“Cantique de Noël” (“O Holy Night”), Placide Cappeau and Adolphe Adam, 1847]*

The music and message pierced me deeply, and tears flowed as I contemplated the glorious sacrifice and perfect life of the Redeemer of Israel—He who was born to be the friend of the lowly and the hope of the meek. I thought of my experience in Jerusalem, and love flooded through my whole being for Him who had come to earth and taken upon Himself the burdens of us all. I was overwhelmed to think that He might regard me as a friend. I have never forgotten the tender feelings of that early

Sunday morning—as pure a witness as I ever received.

So to you now, at this Christmas season, I bear my witness of the Savior of the World. I know that He lives. I know that He was anointed before the creation of the world to proclaim liberty to the captives. He was born of Mary in Bethlehem and raised in Nazareth. He taught the gospel in Galilee, Jerusalem, and throughout Judea, Samaria, and Perea.

He lived a perfect life. He suffered and was crucified for the sins of the world. He rose again the third day and stands enthroned in the heavens above, at the right hand of our Heavenly Father. Of His birth and life I can only say, “Oh, come, let us adore him, Christ, the Lord” (“Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful,” *Hymns*, 1985, no. 202). Of Him I bear witness in His own name, the name of the Lord Immanuel, even in the holy name of Jesus Christ, amen.