

## CHRISTMAS EVE, Dec. 24, 2019

- It looks like a scene right out of the Christmas hymn, “*In the bleak midwinter.*” Peter Bruegel has evocatively painted the arrival of Mary and Joseph at Bethlehem, to participate in the census (*invite attention to it*). It gives us a wonderful way to consider the Christmas Gospel. As Luke presents the story, the circumstances of Jesus’ birth are anchored *in world history*. Yet, as Bruegel shows us, *God’s extraordinary entrance into the world in the Messiah’s birth happens in the midst of the ordinary.*
- Peter Bruegel’s painting is true to the Gospel, even *if* he portrays the scene in a 16th century village in northern Holland. He helps us realize that *Mary and Joseph did not arrive in town that evening with all the attention focused on them.* Just like our lives, and as Peter Bruegel portrays them in his own day, *the world around Joseph and Mary was focused upon itself.*
- *Notice how Bruegel renders the scene:* it’s early evening on a cold winter’s day in northern Europe. The sun is setting behind the great tree, at what might be about 4:00 pm. *Having crossed the surface of a frozen pond, in the lower right, the Holy Family is just arriving at Bethlehem.* To the left, in the direction they are headed, we see a table outside the inn, providing a temporary office for the traveling magistrate. A small crowd gathers there, to be included in the census. Their varying types of clothing suggest they have come from different places. To approach that inn and table, Joseph and Mary must go between several wagons, which are loaded with hay and grain, barrels of beer, and firewood. *In the lower left corner, two hogs are being slaughtered,* perhaps for an upcoming feast or for use in the kitchen of the inn.
- This detail may be significant. For it’s worth noting how common it is in nativity paintings to find *coded reminders of the Passion story that lies ahead.* In Israel and for Jews, it would have been lambs or sheep; here, in northern Holland it is hogs. But either way, the child to be born this night is

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destined to be led *as an animal to slaughter, as an atonement for an unknowing world* – just the kind of world into which he arrived on a cold winter's night.

- Equally oblivious to the arrival of the Holy Family is the rest of the village: *children everywhere are at play* – some skating and sliding on the nearby pond and others playing on the frozen river up to the left. And *all around them are men and women working* at various chores and duties, trying to keep themselves alive. Across that frozen river in the upper left, some *tradespeople are carrying bags of goods* to be sold, while two others move a sled full of similar items in the opposite direction. In the upper center, a group stands around an open fire, and to the right of them another group may be preparing for a hunt.
- In this northern Dutch version of winter in Bethlehem, the world of these people is not so very different from ours. *Just like them, our focus tends to be upon ourselves, upon our daily activities of tasks and duties. So we miss the sheer wonder of the world around us.* And, we miss the mysterious and unexpected presence of the Holy One in our midst. *No one in Bruegel's painting notices the arrival of Mary and Joseph!* {It is just as John wrote in his Gospel: "He was in the world, and... yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him."<sup>1</sup>}
- And so, we might ask, what is it *that makes us notice* the Holy Family in this painting? Perhaps it is because of its title. For *it's possible that, if we came across this painting without seeing the title, we might not even guess its significance. The topic of this painting might not be anymore obvious to us, than Joseph and Mary were to the people in Bethlehem.*
- Well, then, *what is it that helps us notice Jesus come into the world?* What is it that helps us *find him? First, we can be like the shepherds.* They might not

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ever have read the prophecies concerning the coming of the **Messiah**. But their hearts were **open** and **ready**. They were at least aware that **God had chosen his people Israel for a special mission in the world**. And, that at some time, God might come into their midst *personally* as **the Chosen One, the Anointed One**.

- **Second, we can be like the magi**, who traveled from east. They were attentive to **subtle patterns in the world**, and looking for **deeper purpose and meaning within it**. When they found *that one extraordinary star*, like the one great pearl in Jesus' parable, **they put everything else aside** ~ and they followed it to the place where God would lead them. **Even kings**, as tradition usually portrays them, were open to finding and worshipping a **king greater than themselves**. Unlike so many of the people portrayed in Peter Bruegel's painting, **the magi were not {as Sister Wendy puts it} "constrained (and) enclosed in their occupations, unaware of life's possibilities."**<sup>2</sup>
- **We are all involved in advent journeys of discovery**. For in one way or another we all search for what is truly **beautiful**, for what is truly **good**; and, indeed, for the **truth** itself. **Bruegel's Bethlehem is a microcosm of the whole world**: *what is true about all of us* is portrayed in terms of a little northern Dutch village. Here we see the Lord brought safely by his parents into a cold little scene ~ a scene familiar at least to our imaginations if not to our personal experience. **The Lord came to us in winter**. This is of great symbolic importance. Because **before him and without him, our lives are long seasons of dark and dreary winter**.
- This is the night on which we celebrate God's **personal** entrance into our world. God has come to be *with* and *among* us ~ and with those who do not know God. **On this night, life's real possibilities begin to be revealed in a profound way. For this is the night during which God came into the world of God's own making**. Yet, **the Redeemer** found no room for himself in it. He

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came to *his own home*, and *his own people* received him *not*. But on this night, we celebrate a most welcome truth: that, to all who **do** receive him, and to all who believe in his name, he gives the power to become the children of God.

- On *this* night, so many adults have the joy of becoming *like children again*, as we delight in celebrating Christmas with families and young ones. *This is also* a night when we become *a child of God*. It happens when we receive a gift ~ the great gift of God's own self in the Word made flesh.
- **The Word has become flesh and even now dwells among us, full of grace and truth.** In the midst of all our activities, our tasks and our duties, and the joy of all our celebrations, we can look for him. And, *if we are looking for him, we will behold the glory of God*. In the approaching cold and dark of a winter's evening, the Light of the World came into a busy village. *And the light is still here to be found and received.*



Pieter Bruegel, *Census at Bethlehem*, 1566

### **Luke 2:1-20**

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

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

"Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

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

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### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> John 1:10-11.

<sup>2</sup> An observation by Sister Wendy.