

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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The Beautiful Ugliers of Christmas

(Luke 1-2)

Introduction: A Hallmark Xmas, or CHRISTmas...

Clearly, Hallmark has never met a holiday it didn't love.

From Halloween to Thanksgiving, from Valentine's Day to graduations, from birthdays to anniversaries, and from Grandparent's Day to Groundhog Day, there are cards for all occasions. There are funny and satirical and cute and mushy and sexy cards. Hallmark loves holidays.

Now, I don't know if Hallmark loves Jesus or not, but I'm sure Hallmark loves Christmas. The card shops have a field day in the weeks leading up to Christmas.

Most of the cards sold are feel-good masterpieces. They show happy animals - and not just the barnyard variety. Mice and chipmunks, too. A favorite theme is the New England farm covered with snow. Add a horse drawn sleigh and you've got a winner. Solitary evergreen trees out in a field are popular, as well.

In the Christmas "religious section" (Isn't it ironic that there would be anything else?) you'll find cards with images of Mary and Joseph serenely gathered around a manger while a halo-adorned Baby gives a beatific smile.

Of course, most everything you see on any of these cards is sheer nonsense. As far as we know, the scene of the actual birth of Jesus contained zero chipmunks or fir trees, and certainly no red barns.

And, while the mom and dad by the manger may have been serene, they were probably more exhausted than anything else.

My prayer this year is that you and I will enjoy the most Jesus-filled Christmas we have ever known. And I'm hopeful that our time in the Bible today will help it be so.

However, as we open our Bibles together, we'll be opening to a strong dose of reality. We're moving past the hype and the sentimentality and are looking at the first Christmas, unadorned with no add-on pretties.

I contend that the story of the birth of Jesus, the most beautiful birth ever, is filled with ugliness - AND that those uglies are beautiful to us.

We do, however, find a birth story at the beginning of Luke's Gospel that is entirely beautiful, start to finish.

I'm not talking about the story of the birth of Jesus. It is the story of the birth of John the Baptist I have in mind.

One Delightful Birth Tale (Luke 1:5-25, 57-80)

OLD Zacharias and Elizabeth

John's birth story revolves around a couple - a priest named Zacharias and his wife, Elizabeth - who had longed to have children for their entire married lives. Sadly, this elderly couple was childless.

How elderly were they?

For a long time I envisioned Zacharias being what we would call today a "senior citizen." Certainly active, not feeble. But, you know, old. Then, about ten years ago, I got to thinking...

Zacharias was an active priest. And Moses made it clear that a man could work as an active priest ONLY until he was fifty. After that he had to retire, since priestly work was so strenuous.¹

This means that Zacharias, this OLD MAN, "*advanced in years*," was in his FORTIES. Ten years ago, I found that quite depressing!

¹ See Numbers 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47; 8:25

At any rate, this *elderly* couple desperately longed for children. And then, one eventful day, they received wonderful news!

Good News in the Temple! (1:8-25)

As we enter the story Luke tells, Zacharias was performing his priestly duties,² minding God's business in the Holy Place when all of a sudden, the angel Gabriel showed up!

Gabriel³ announced amazing news: "*Zacharias, your prayers have been answered. You and Elizabeth are going to be parents!*"

How thrilling! After all those years of waiting and hoping and praying they would finally have a child.

Fine, but Zacharias had a question. Roughly translated, he asked Gabriel, "*How can I know this 'fer sure'?*"

Wrong question! Gabriel stood in the presence of God. He spoke with authority. He was to be believed.

So, Gabriel rebuked Zacharias for his faithlessness and took away his ability to speak. This proud father-to-be would be unable to talk until the promised child was born.

Now, while all this was going on inside the Temple, those standing outside were starting to get nervous because Zacharias was taking far longer than the priest normally took to finish his work.

Those outside were wondering at Zacharias' delay, perhaps fearing that he had been struck dead.⁴

Not that they feared death due to old age (although you forty-somethings out there can't be too careful), but because ministering in the presence of God was serious business.

Zacharias, though, hadn't been struck dead. He had been struck dumb! And sure enough, when Zacharias walked out of the Temple, just like the angel said, he was unable to speak a word.

The Birth of John the Baptist! (1:57-80)

But also, just like the angel said, not long after he returned to his home in the hill country of Judea, his wife Elizabeth conceived!

It is easy to imagine that the months of Elizabeth's pregnancy were sheer delight. Granted, there wasn't much conversation, but she and Zacharias were no doubt filled with joy at the prospect of having a child.

And their child wouldn't be just any child. They were given the bonus of knowing that their son would be great in the eyes of the Lord. (Luke 1:15) He would be the one who would prepare the way for the long-awaited Messiah!

What parent wouldn't love to know, in advance, that their son, their daughter, would walk with God and would make a difference for God?

That was the assurance that Zacharias and Elizabeth had about their son. And after long months (decades!) of expecting, the day finally arrived. Elizabeth delivered a healthy baby boy.

As soon as Zacharias indicated by writing (Luke 1:63) that the child would be called "John" (the name that Gabriel had told him to give the child), he was able to speak again and began praising God.

All in all, it is a beautiful story! An ancient couple - well into their forties (!) - are given the gift of a child whose life will count for God. The whole thing is overwhelmingly GOOD NEWS.

You can bet that Elizabeth was the toast of their little hill country town. Zacharias was the proudest papa on the street and John was the most celebrated baby in Judea.

² In those days, priests served in the Temple on a rotating basis.

³ His name means "God is great" in Hebrew.

⁴ The book of Exodus tells us that the High Priest had bells tied on to the bottom of his robe, so that the people could hear the sound of him moving around in the Holy of Holies as he was offering sacrifice and making atonement for the people. If they didn't hear the sound of the bells, they would know that he had been struck dead, and that the Lord had been displeased with the sacrifice. (Exodus 28:33ff)

The story of the birth of John the Baptist is a beautiful story. And intertwined with the telling of that story, is the story of another birth.

This second story traces some of the details of an even more remarkable birth than John's.

And, while there IS joy in this story, the events surrounding the birth AND the birth itself are much more about disruption than joy.

Six months after his visit to Zacharias, the angel Gabriel was commissioned by God to make another "Coming Attractions" announcement, this time to another woman who had never been a mother.

This woman, Mary, was much, much younger than Elizabeth.

One Glorious (with uglies) Birth Tale (Luke 1:26-38; 2:1-19)

Good News! (Luke 1:26-38)

Gabriel greets Mary! (vv. 26-29)

[26] Now in the sixth month (that is, the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy) ***the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city in Galilee called Nazareth,***⁵ ***[27] to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the descendants of David; and the virgin's name was Mary.***⁶ ***[28] And coming in, he said to her, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."*** ***[29] But she was very perplexed at this statement, and kept pondering what kind of salutation this was.***

⁵ Luke includes the geographic locator ("***a city in Galilee***") in verse 26 because he knew that his non-Jewish readers, like Theophilus - and us! - wouldn't know that Nazareth, a city of only moderate size and reputation, was in the region of Galilee.

⁶ By referring to Mary as a virgin, Gabriel means to say that she had never been intimate with a man. She was engaged to Joseph, but they weren't married and hadn't consummated their relationship.

⁷ We should not take this to mean that the angel is telling Mary that she is in any way going to dispense grace. She is not a source of grace. Rather, the angel means that God's grace and favor rests on her.

We're not surprised that Mary was perplexed by the angel's greeting - both by the fact that she was being greeted by an angel, and by the greeting this angel had to give her!

But while she was busy pondering, Gabriel spoke to Mary's confusion, and, as he had done with Zacharias, announced Good News.

Gabriel announces Good News to Mary (vv. 30-34)

[30] The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. [31] And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus."⁸ ***[32] He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; [33] and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end."***

Now if any father would have been glad to have heard the news Zacharias received about the birth of his son, John, I've got to believe that any prospective mother would be happy to hear this kind of news about her soon to be born child.

But Mary was confused. The angel seemed to be speaking about a conception and birth that was imminent - and Mary knew enough biology to know that this couldn't happen.

So, she asked the question.

[34] "How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

The angel's announcement was preposterous. Pregnant without having been with a man? We, who are so familiar with the story, could slide right on by the outrageousness of the virgin birth.⁹

⁸ His name, *Jesus*, (Yeshua) means SAVIOR.

⁹ Author Philip Yancey writes the following in a book that I highly recommend to anyone who wants to know more about Jesus, The Jesus I Never Knew: "I recall watching an episode of the TV show *Thirtysomething* in which Hope, a Christian, argues with her Jewish husband, Michael, about the holidays. 'Why do you even bother with Hanukkah?' she asks. 'Do you really believe a handful of Jews held off a huge army by using a bunch of lamps that miraculously wouldn't run out of oil?' Michael explodes. 'Oh, and Christmas makes more sense? Do you really believe an

We believe it's true. But we can also understand Mary's confusion! So, Gabriel patiently responded to Mary's honest question (a "how" question, as opposed to Zacharias' "if" question).

Gabriel EXPLAINS the Good News to Mary (vv. 35-38)

[35] The angel answered and said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God. [36] And behold, even your relative Elizabeth has also conceived a son in her old age; and she who was called barren is now in her sixth month.¹⁰ [37] For nothing will be impossible with God."

And just like that, Mary accepted the angels' message with a world-class response!

[38] "Behold, the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word."

You can see the wheels turning in Mary's mind: "OK. The Child I will bear will be uniquely conceived. Somehow, what my mother told me about the birds and the bees won't apply to me. Without sex, without a man, I will become pregnant by the Almighty."

For a long time now, I have believed that Mary's words, "***Behold the bondslave of the Lord; may it be done to me according to Your word***" are among the most powerful and liberating words any of us can ever say.

It is to place ourselves, our fortunes, our futures, our welfare, our loved ones, our hopes and dreams - all of it, in the hands of God.

Of course it is possible to make too much of Mary and to place too much emphasis on her. But I also think that it is possible to make too little of her.

angel appeared to some teenage girl who then got pregnant without even having had sex and traveled on horseback to Bethlehem where she spent the night in a barn and had a baby who turned out to be the Savior of the world?"

¹⁰ John was related to Jesus, since Mary and Elizabeth are referred to as relatives, but the term is too general to know precisely what their blood relationship was.

Mary's faith and her submission to God serve as tremendous models for us. And I think that we *should* hold Mary in very high esteem.

Well, shortly after the angel departed, Mary was found to be with child and went to stay with her also-pregnant relative, Elizabeth, and her (very quiet) husband, Zacharias, in the hill country of Judea.

When the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, Mary left to return to Nazareth. And, then, we read the narrative describing the events surrounding the birth of her Son, Jesus.¹¹

Luke prepares us to focus on the birth of Jesus by shifting our focus from the backwater village of Nazareth to the center of political power: Rome. In far-away Rome, Caesar Augustus has issued a decree.

A Tough Road to Travel (vv. 1-5)

Caesar Takes a Census (vv. 1-3)

Like any good story-teller, Luke gives the historical context of the events he is about to describe.

It all took place, not, "*Once upon a time...*" but ***[2:2]...while Quirinius was governor of Syria.***" With those words, he ushers us into the politics of the day.¹²

The implication of a census being taken of the Jews at the command of the Roman Emperor thousands of miles away alerts us to the fact that when Jesus was born, God's people were a subject people. Israel found herself squarely under the thumb of imperial Rome.

¹¹ You'll notice a glaring omission in the narrative. Not one word is written about the months of Mary's pregnancy. We are left to wonder what those months of pregnancy would have been like. But it's not difficult to envision an uncomfortable time, physically, emotionally, and socially. Did anyone in Nazareth really believe that she and Joseph had not been intimate? Matthew's Gospel tells us that Joseph (and he knew he wasn't the father) suspected Mary of being intimate with someone else before the angel set him straight. Was she ostracized by friends? By family?

¹² We know from documents surviving from this time period that Rome took a census every fourteen years in Egypt, and it is likely that the policy would have been the same for Palestine. Actual documents survive for every census from AD 20 to 270 (so Barclay).

And this census figures into the story of the birth of Mary's Child because Caesar required that all heads of Jewish households had **[3] to register for the census** in their ancestral hometown.¹³

For Joseph, that meant traveling to Bethlehem.

Tracing the lineage of Joseph

[4] Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David,¹⁴ [5] in order to register along with Mary, who was engaged to him, and was with child.

Both Joseph and Mary descended from the ancient kings of Israel - David and Solomon and Jehoshaphat and Hezekiah and Josiah. And this ancestry, among other things, gave Mary's Son, Jesus, the right to claim the title of King/Messiah!

For Mary and Joseph, though, the immediate impact of their ancestry meant a long trip under really tough conditions.

Tracing the journey of Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem

Most scholars suspect that it would have taken a week or two for this young, still not married (v. 5)¹⁵ couple to travel the one hundred miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

They would have loaded the donkey with all the food and supplies necessary for such a trip.

They would have headed due east out of Nazareth to the Jordan River.

¹³ Why does Luke mention the census? To put the story of the birth of Jesus in its proper historical context and to show how it was a certainty that Jesus would be born in Bethlehem. Micah predicts (5:2) that Messiah would be born there.

¹⁴ Compare the two Gospel genealogies found in Matthew and Luke and you will find differences. The simplest way to explain these differences is to see that Luke traces Jesus' ancestry through Mary, while Matthew traces the royal lineage of Jesus back through all the Jewish Kings of Judah to King David.

¹⁵ Luke refers to Mary as Joseph's betrothed, not his wife. Matthew says Joseph took Mary as his wife, but not that they were officially married. (Mt. 1:25).

Then, going south on the eastern side of the Jordan so as to avoid traveling through Samaria, they would have continued until they came to a suitable place to cross the Jordan opposite Judea, likely near Jericho.

While we don't know exactly when this journey took place, my own studies lead me to think that they traveled in December and that the weather could have been as uncomfortable as was this past week for us.

Then, traveling west (and uphill) they would have passed through Jerusalem and landed in Bethlehem. Luke describes the birth of Mary's Child simply and with no fanfare.

A Stables' Birthing Room (vv. 6-7)

Reflecting on the birth

[6] While they were there, the days were completed for her to give birth. [7a] And she gave birth to her firstborn son...

There would have been no skilled physician and there is no mention of a helpful midwife. There was certainly no birthing room with soft lights, no music in the background, no attendants, and no pain killers.

Nor are any details provided. Only that at the end, after the exhausting work was done, Jesus was born. Mary did the honors of laying Him down in His first cradle.

[7b]...and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger

That she laid Jesus down in a manger (feeding trough) means that He was born in a place where animals were kept. That makes us think "Barn!" - which has led to the placing of stables scenes around town.

More accurately, the barn was likely a limestone cave.¹⁶ And the manger was probably not a heavy, wooden feeding trough, but a concave stone used to hold grain for the animals who bedded down in the place.

¹⁶ The Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem is erected over a hollowed out cave believed to have been the place of Jesus' birth.

And why didn't Joseph find a more pleasant place for the birth of Mary's Baby?

Reflecting on Bethlehem

[7c]...because there was no room for them in the inn

I'm betting that Joseph did his best to find suitable lodging. But, you know, when the "No Vacancy" sign blinks, there are no vacancies.

Still, what does it say about the times in which Jesus was born that in a small village like Bethlehem, nobody would give up a bed for a teenage girl away from home about to give birth on a winter night?

The callousness of the scene nearly takes your breath away.

The glorious good news of these first seven verses is that Jesus was born. But the attending details don't leave us much room for celebrating.

Luke includes the details he does to highlight the lowlights of Jesus' inglorious entrance into the world He created.

We can even number the uglies.

#1: A TAXING SITUATION: Remember that the reason Joseph had to take the trip to Bethlehem in the first place was to register for the census so that they could pay taxes to Rome. Nothing pretty about THAT!

#2 - MARY WAS A VERY PREGNANT TRAVELER: Then, too, Luke reminds us that they had been forced by law to travel one hundred miles (from Nazareth to Bethlehem) while Mary was on the verge of labor.

#3 - THERE WERE, AS YET, NO WEDDING BANDS: Luke emphasizes that Joseph and Mary were engaged - not married - as they traveled to Bethlehem together.

#4 - THERE WAS NO ROOM IN THE INN: When they finally arrived in Bethlehem, they were denied a place to stay in the only lodging place in town, likely because it was filled with travelers who were, like them, coming to pay their taxes.

#5 - JESUS' CRIB WAS A FEEDING TROUGH: No soft crib for Jesus.

Everything about the birth points to obscurity and poverty, to humility and rejection. A rather inauspicious beginning for the Son of God - but the night is young and there is more to come.

Following the birth of His Son, God planned a reception - and that, we think, is only right. A welcoming committee would be a nice touch, indeed!

But the welcoming committee that actually landed at the stables wasn't the one that you or I might have planned for the Son of God. It was, however, exactly, the reception God wanted for Jesus.

Jesus' "Welcoming Committee (2:8ff)

[8] In the same region there were some shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock by night. [9] And an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. [10] But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; [11] for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger."

[13] And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, [14] "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

Luke goes on to tell us that the shepherds followed the angels' instructions and found Jesus - the first people beyond Mary and Joseph to see Him. (vv. 15-18)

We are drawn to shepherds' stories. And, from the very beginning, Scripture gives an honored place to shepherds. Abel, Adam's righteous son, was a shepherd.

So were Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all of Jacob's sons identified as shepherds. Moses was a shepherd when God called him to lead Israel out of Egypt and so was David before he became king.

However, in the days of Jesus, shepherds were not highly regarded at all.

Being a shepherd was a FULL-time occupation - and watching over the sheep kept a shepherd out in the fields for much of the year.

For that reason they missed regular times of worship and weren't able to observe the finer points of ceremonial law that meant so much to religious people.

Because they missed regular worship, the Rabbis prohibited them from participating in the Temple services at all, even when they were able.

For a variety of reasons, they had a low standing in the community. Their livelihood brought them in contact with uncleanness on a regular basis. They were considered unreliable and were not allowed to give testimony in a court of law.¹⁷

It is quite possible that the shepherds we find here in Luke, chapter 2 were devout men. But they did come from a despised class of people.

Yet they were the ones who composed the welcoming committee God orchestrated for His Son's entrance into our world.

And THAT - along with the other "uglies" - is the real story of Christmas.

Conclusion:

Imagine that you were a marketing consultant doing some work for God. It is possible that you might suggest changing a detail or two about the circumstances surrounding Jesus' birth.

"Let's change the scenery a bit, Lord. Bethlehem is OK, but the stables thing doesn't work. There's a nice hotel - a five star for dignitaries coming in from Jerusalemites to get a little R&R. It would serve as a good place to stage the birth - way better than the stables or that two-bit inn Joseph tried to use.

"And then the shepherds. Shepherds are nice enough folks. I like shepherds. But trust me on this one - not for the birth of Your Son. The welcoming committee at the birth should be the right kind of people. Let's get the Temple officials to come over from Jerusalem, Herod and his family, maybe invite Caesar. We'll make sure the paparazzi are out in force."

"And if Your Son has to born outside of Jerusalem (I really think it should be Jerusalem - but we've been over that...) there should be a reception as the family heads into Bethlehem. Let's bill it, 'Son of David Comes Home at Last!' - banners, streamers, crowds, parades, the whole nine yards.

"And, one last thing. I like the virgin birth. But the 'engaged' bit doesn't work well. Joseph needs to make the marriage official prior to the conception. Too much scandal."

All of these would have been excellent suggestions IF what God had wanted to do was impress the world with grandeur, power, and glory at Jesus' birth. But that was never what God intended.

His plan was for Jesus to walk the roads of humility and servanthood and sacrifice so that He could bring you and me to God. And the birth at Bethlehem telegraphed exactly that life.

Today we have thought about the lowly entrance into history Jesus made.

Zacharias had to be calmed down when he was confronted by Gabriel in the Temple. "***Do not be afraid***" was exactly what he needed to hear. Mary needed the same when she heard from the angel that she would give birth to the Messiah. "***Do not be afraid***" said the angel.

¹⁷ One commentator references shepherds' regrettable habit of confusing "mine" with "thine" as they moved about.

When the shepherds heard the announcement out in the field, they, too, needed to hear, ***“Do not be afraid.”***

But when those shepherds arrived at the Bethlehem stables, there was no need to warn them, ***“Fear not.”*** It was a baby. Helpless. Weak. Vulnerable.¹⁸

Yet what they saw - a newborn baby with jerky limbs and eyes that don't focus - drove them to worship.

[20] The shepherds went back, glorifying and praising God for all that they had heard and seen, just as had been told them.

This morning, we worship a Jesus who did not seek popularity, publicity, comfort, safety or ease.¹⁹

We who believe that a passionate pursuit of a life-changing relationship with God is the best way to live understand that God Himself illustrates what passionate pursuit is all about.

All of our passionate pursuit of Him is but a black and white imitation of His Technicolor pursuit of us.

He endured ugliness so that you and I might experience the beauty of a relationship with God.

Merry Christmas!! May the Jesus who humbled Himself to bring you life find room in YOUR heart this day as you trust Him.

[2 Corinthians 8:9] For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.

¹⁸ As I read somewhere (sorry, can't recall where), “In Jesus' birth, God used a mode of approach that humanity need not fear. A mode so familiar, that the greater danger is not that we'll be scared of Him, but that we will overlook Him, take Him for granted, and yawn our way through another Christmas.”

¹⁹ Frederick Buechner writes in The Hungering Dark, “Those who believe in God can never be sure of Him again. Once we have seen Him in a stable, we can never be sure where He will appear or to what lengths He will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation He will descend in His wild pursuit of us.”