

It Takes a Village

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Sunday, December 21, 2025

December is simply chock-a-block with holidays and celebrations all over the world. There's Hanukkah, Yule, Christmas, Saturnalia, and Kwanzaa. Then there's also Santa Lucia day, St. Nicholas Day, and the feast of our Lady of Guadalupe. Let's not forget Mary's Immaculate Conception on the 8th, as well as the celebration of the Buddha's enlightenment, Bodhi day that same day. When we here in Canada are celebrating Boxing Day, Zoroastrians are commemorating the death of their prophet, Zoroaster. And, let's not forget Festivus, for the rest of us.

Today, we lit the fourth candle of Advent, marking the time of waiting for the arrival of Jesus, as foretold in prophecy, I want to talk about the story of his birth. I'll share with you some of what I've learned and thought about as I've researched the Christmas story and how it has evolved over the millennia.

Imagine a picture of what we call "the manger scene" captured in classical Western art for hundreds of years, sometimes with only the family present, Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Others show the shepherds and animals and Magi gathered around the baby, with angels hovering above and the bright star of the East illuminating the night sky. Often, the focus is solely on Mary and the baby.

In the New Testament of the Christian Bible, we find various accounts of the birth of Jesus in the Gospels, the first four books, attributed to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John. Two of these authors are said to be original apostles of Jesus (Matthew and John), one was an associate of Paul (Mark), and Luke was Paul's physician and companion. Scholars have debated the authorship of these texts for years, but generally agree that they were written between 50 and 100 CE, which may cast doubt on the ascribed authorship of the books, given the age of the apostles and others. And, each of the Gospels takes a bit of a different perspective on what happened.

As you know, the books of the Bible were written at various times. They captured oral history, stories passed down through the generations, prophecy, poetry, and people's experiences and opinions. The Gospels are not particularly detailed, and they leave a lot of questions unanswered about what happened when Jesus was born, for that matter, any of the events they chronicle. In addition, only certain historical texts were chosen to be included in the Bible, and there exist other ancient texts that speak more about events around the time of the Nativity, as well as the history of Judea, the Jewish people, and what happened after Jesus' death, and they often present very different

information than what is contained in the books included in the final Bible text. And still, the story of Jesus' birth is remarkable and spectacular and unique!

Our December theme is on caring communities. Those people in our lives who provide support, companionship, aid and assistance, a listening ear and a strong back when they are needed. The people we share our existence with and who we turn to when we need assistance.

I know you are familiar with the phrase "it takes a village to raise a child." I think that was true 2000 years ago as it is today. Parents needed communities to help them birth, care for, rear, and launch their children in ancient Judea just like they do in modern Toronto. Children needed to be fed, cleaned, held, comforted, disciplined, and enculturated to the circumstances of the year one, as they do in the year 2025.

Think back to those artistic representations of that little family. What happened and who helped them before the shepherds arrived and the Magi gave them valuable gifts? What community supported them in the months leading up to Jesus' arrival? Here are some things I've thought about.

Mary learned that she would bear a child from the angel Gabriel, who appeared to her and told her she was chosen for a great honour - to bear the son of God, who would become a savior to their people, the Jews. While Mary is described as deeply faithful and devout, she had a bit of trouble accepting Gabriel's message at first. The Gospels tell us that she responded with something akin to "Are you sure? I'm a young, unmarried woman and I'm not sure I understand what you're talking about, because that isn't how it is, you know?"

After accepting Gabriel at his word, someone had to tell Joseph, the man Mary was betrothed to. Although according to Jewish custom, the couple would be engaged for a year, according to Scripture, they remained chaste in their relationship. Therefore, Mary being pregnant was going to be a surprise for Joseph. So, an angel appears in Joseph's dreams and assures him that he can trust Mary, and God, and go ahead and marry her.

So the first community they have to talk with would be their families. The people who knew them best and had encouraged their engagement and marriage. Unwed mothers, and brides expecting before the wedding, were not popular in that culture in those years - much like some cultures and communities today. Joseph and Mary must have been incredibly nervous to have "the talk" with their relatives and to try and convince them of the veracity of Mary's claim to be pregnant by God, especially when so much emphasis is placed on her being a virgin in the Gospels.

Apparently, the conversation had a positive outcome, because Mary and Joseph continue their relationship and begin to prepare for their future as husband and wife.

Mary travels around 140 KM in mountainous territory to reach the home of her cousin, Elizabeth, who is about 6 months pregnant at the time with the baby who will become John, the Baptist. The trip would have taken several days and was dangerous, but Mary wanted and needed to see her cousin. The women shared their experience of pregnancy, and I'm sure it was comforting for both of them to talk, share experiences, and try to understand what was happening to them. Elizabeth's warm welcome must have provided validation and comfort to the young mother-to-be. The community of their families provided safety, shelter, protection, and encouragement to the couple as they faced their unique future.

Judea at that time was under Roman occupation and the rule of the Empire's representatives in their historical homeland. Joseph received word that he - that all of the people - would have to travel to their original home city to register for the census. For Joseph, this meant he and Mary would have to travel to Bethlehem, around 150 KM. (You can make the drive today in about 2 hours. By donkey, loaded with provisions and a hugely pregnant young woman, would take somewhat longer.)

The second community that surrounded the couple were their traveling companions on the road, those also going to Bethlehem to register for the census. Elders, families with children, individuals, all walking or in carts, having to stop for rest or water, to camp along the route for the night, would have seen Mary's condition and probably offered their help. Perhaps some food or drink, comforting words or an extra blanket to soften sleeping on the ground. It might have been just a conversation to make the time go by. People who live their lives in close community often understand the cooperation and camaraderie that makes the whole thing work. Everyone contributes, and everyone receives.

Finally, the family reaches Bethlehem, and apparently they didn't have access to Trivago, because the Gospels tell us that they didn't have reservations and can find no suitable accommodation where they can stay. They are frustrated at every establishment they try, until they are offered space on the first floor of a residence. In these times, homes generally were two levels, the top level was the "house" portion, where the family lived, cooked, slept, and accomplished their day-to-day activities. The lower level was where supplies were stored, where the family's animals were sheltered and cared for, and where room would be available to accommodate travelers. The animals provided heat in colder months, which rose to warm the second level living spaces.

My impression when I was younger was that Mary and Joseph were somehow shown to inferior accommodations. However, as I have read more, I've learned that it was not unusual for visitors to be offered this space in private homes. Bethlehem was buzzing with activity and visitors because of the census mandate. It's possible that Joseph and

Mary actually was staying with relatives, but there was no open guest room in their home. The host family, whether related to either Joseph or Mary or not, would have been curious about the travelers. The protocol of the time demanded that people be hospitable and generous with guests, and it's therefore quite possible that they visited with the couple, helped them get comfortable, offered them food or drink, and possibly included them in their family meals and activities.

We don't know how long they were in Bethlehem before Mary's time to give birth neared. But, at that time, another person likely entered their community of support - a midwife. Non-canonical books mention that Joseph called for the assistance of a midwife, and it would have been culturally consistent with the times, when healthcare was scarce. It makes sense, as well, as Mary is giving birth for the first time, she is young and inexperienced. It's possible that several women arrived to assist her in labour and birth, helping to hold her up as she experienced her contractions, washing and wrapping the infant when he arrived, and keeping Joseph informed of the progress of her labour. Per custom, Joseph would not be allowed to be with his wife as she gave birth, but only to return when the child and mother were prepared and ready to receive him.

Bible accounts tell us that the next additions to the community were the shepherds who were in the fields outside Bethlehem, watching their sheep and goats at night. Bright lights appeared, which surrounded angels, singing songs of praise we are told, and informing the farmers of the birth of a savior, a Messiah, whom they were encouraged to go visit and see for themselves. Directed to look for a babe wrapped in linen, referred to as swaddling clothes, the shepherds banded together and headed into town to find the child. As a result of seeing Jesus, they began to tell others of the arrival of the Messiah foretold by prophecy, just as they understood he would be. Their news amazed all who heard it, it is said.

Perhaps the inclusion of the shepherds was to emphasize that Jesus was human and humble. But, if the shepherds weren't enough, we have the animals surrounding the family in the home to remind us of his common beginnings. Here was someone who people could relate to - a seemingly wondrous, but normal baby, with no trappings of wealth, power, or privilege. Here was a savior who could relate to people of all kinds, communicate with them in ways they could understand, and make his mission among them. It was a totally different experience of leadership, power, and social interaction than they'd every experienced.

Time passes - we don't know how long - and three Magi appear to see what this child is all about. They were of the priestly class, learned and wise, familiar with astronomy, magic, and ancient wisdom. With them they brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. It appears that the nature of baby gifts has changed radically over the centuries.

Actually, the gifts mentioned are not only valuable, but highly symbolic. Gold is related to kingship, frankincense to associated with the priesthood, and myrrh was utilized in healing and death rituals. Their visit also symbolizes that Jesus was born to serve all nations and peoples, not just Jews. Scholars speculate that the "wise men" as we refer to them, came from Persia (the modern-day Iran) or the Indian subcontinent. They may have been following a prophecy of Zoroaster, or not. We understand that they were three in number, but there have been as many as twelve reported in other documents. We understand that their names were Balthazar, Caspar, and Melchior, but these names date from the 8th century, C.E. We actually are not sure of their names, nationalities, occupations, histories, appearance, or much of anything concrete about them, including why they were traveling in Judea in the first place.

But they show up in the story, arriving up to two years after Jesus' actual birth, and are now an integral part of the birth story we know and repeat and re-enact today. If you'll remember the pop-up pageant, you'll recall the important characters in the story, of course.

And, we know the story of Jesus' life goes on - the family presented him at the Temple, according to Jewish tradition, for purification rituals and circumcision. Because the Roman governor of Judea at the time appears to have feared the possible impact of a "Jewish King", as Jesus was sometimes called, he ordered the murder of all male children under the age of two. Because of this threat, Mary and Joseph packed up and escaped to Egypt until the furor died down. Eventually, they returned to Nazareth, and watched over their unique child of destiny grow into his maturity and ministry.

Jesus lived his entire life in community, family, friends, neighbours, apostles, followers - he spent almost no part of his life without being accompanied, assisted, supported, and supporting others. It truly took a village to bring him to birth, to continue with his childhood, and to grow into the man he became. Jesus was not a "self-made" man, not only because that was not the cultural standard or ideal of his day, but because his mission in the world was designed for other people, to share his ideas of how to live a fulfilling, meaningful, and productive life even when living under the thumb of a repressive regime.

All of us need a village, at any age, to fully live into who we are meant to be, to be of use and companionship to our fellow beings, and to enjoy the company and support of others as we navigate our lives and the circumstances we find ourselves in.