

## Music and the Word: Bethlehem *by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle*

### Prayer of Adoration

Lord God, we continue our journey to Bethlehem,  
Where we stand with the shepherds, amazed at your glory.  
We sing with the angels, rejoicing at your work.  
We wait with Joseph, trusting in your promise.  
We sit with Mary, cradling your love.  
May the good tidings of comfort and joy,  
Inspire us to share and show to the world, that for us a child is born,  
To us a son is given—the Messiah, our Lord.  
Glory and praise to you forever! Amen.

### Scripture No. 1: Luke 2:8-15 (NRSV)

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.”

### SERMONETTE No. 1 – *Hush, Missus Teenage Mary*

Bethlehem that first Christmas was like a cosmic magnet. A small city with a powerful magnetic pull, Bethlehem attracted international players onto the stage for the greatest birth story ever told.

Mary and Joseph were drawn to the city of David, returning to the origin of Joseph's family tree.

The shepherds—the lowest of society, were drawn into the magnetic field of the Messiah—being the first people told of the newborn king and the first to behold him.

Even the Magi from distant Gentile lands felt the attraction to Bethlehem.

Just as a magnet has a north and south poles, not only the good were drawn to Bethlehem, but the bad as well. On Herod's orders, his henchman killed innocent children in and around Bethlehem. And yes, God was there in Bethlehem—Immanuel, *God with us*. Drawing in angels, shepherds, wise men, and peasants.

This advent season, we too feel the pull of Bethlehem to come and see the good tidings of comfort and joy found in the newborn babe. Let us join in with these characters going Bethlehemward. Steady yourself—the walk is often not easy. It's filled with potholes and pitfalls, cliffs, and risks. The road can be winding and the days long. We must sometimes scale what feels like endless mountain ranges or wander dry and desolate deserts and dark nights of the soul. Through it all—along the journey and to the destination—God is with us.

Come and be drawn into the divine pull of Bethlehem, to gaze upon salvation in human form.

Amen.

### **Scripture No. 2: Matthew 2:1-6 (NRSV)**

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage."

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet:

'And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,  
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;  
for from you shall come a ruler  
who is to shepherd my people Israel.'"

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## **SERMONETTE No. 2 – *O Little Town of Bethlehem***

There's a lot we don't know about the magi. There's a lot we have embellished that we "take" for truth. We don't know their names. We don't know there were three of them. We don't know their means for transport, although if they came from Persia, they most likely came on powerful horses than camels. They were most likely not kings.

But we do know, the Magi saw an unusual star that they took to be the sign of the birth of Messiah in Israel. And they traveled to Jerusalem to find out where he was. What a threat that must have been for Herod, especially given the prevailing rumor of a new king.

What a surprise for the Magi that those in Jerusalem were oblivious that the Messiah was here!

In the scripture, the Magi see the star twice, once while in Persia. And then again after they head toward Bethlehem, and they find the Light shining over where the baby lay. They could recognize the baby by the Light. The sign of the "New Exodus" had begun.

This story is most recognizable in another story—that of the first exodus. God leads the people of Israel through the wilderness by means of a cloud of light. This is the metaphor in the Hebrew Scriptures for God's presence. God's glory cloud signifies that God is present in that place—God will lead his people by this light. This is no ordinary child. This is the Light of the World. The light of the star led to the light of the son.

The Light is the sign that God's plan for the world has been put into effect. The light has overcome the darkness. Jesus IS the Light. Jesus IS the sign. The star, the shield of David, the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Son of God has been born into the world.

Everything has changed.

### **Scripture No. 3: Luke 2:8-15 (NRSV)**

When Herod saw that he had been tricked by the wise men, he was infuriated, and he sent and killed all the children in and around Bethlehem who were two years old or under, according to the time that he had learned from the wise men. Then was fulfilled what had been spoken through the prophet Jeremiah:

"A voice was heard in Ramah,  
wailing and loud lamentation,  
Rachel weeping for her children;  
she refused to be consoled, because they are no more."

### **SERMONETTE No. 3 – *Herod***

Good will come. But bad things will follow. Good and bad are eternal companions on the journey of life, just as there is the north pole and the south pole to a magnet.

The magi had come to witness and worship the newborn king. Their presence and testimony was good. But sinister forces were at work too.

Herod was widely noted for his ruthlessness and murderous tendencies. He had three of his own sons executed. And so Herod didn't respond well to all the talk and rumors of a newborn king, a Messiah for the Jewish people. Enraged and embarrassed by this act of perceived treachery, Herod ordered the "massacre of the innocents."

All male children under the age of two in the area of Bethlehem were given a death sentence. They were executed by mercenary soldiers working for Herod. Here is the greatest birth story ever told. And with it comes the horror of infanticide and genocide.

From the very beginning of the Jesus story, the good and the bad were traveling together, side by side.

#### **Scripture No. 4: Luke 2:1-5 (NRSV)**

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.

### **SERMONETTE No. 4 – *Mary All Alone***

It's quite possible Joseph and Mary travelled not alone, but with their family, and friends by their side. They would have camped by fireside at night and walked by day the approximately six to eight days from Mary's home to her husband's family and their new life.

The trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem was at least 90 miles in the first century, maybe as much as 130 miles depending on the terrain and the route of that time. The typical route and the safest was to set out over the mountains to the southern shores of the Sea of Galilee in the region of Cana, then move west, crossing the Jordan River and into the fertile valley of present-day Jordan. Then they would cross back over the Jordan River again just before Jericho. Most likely to avoid the rigors of the Judean wilderness, they would have entered Jerusalem by way of the

Mount of Olives and then would have moved on from there to the grassy, grain-filled hillsides of fertile Bethlehem, where shepherds were tending the sheep destined for the Temple sacrifices.

One step at a time, the two literally walk a covenant walk through desert, mountains, forest, and water—equipped only with their faith to come into a new place, a resting place, a birthing place.

And so the “pilgrimage” began—one that would take the couple not just to a new geographical place, but one that would take them into a place of no return spiritually, emotionally, faithfully, and historically. For this was no ordinary pilgrimage but one that would define a “walk” with God that would extend to every human being.

Bethlehem is where the journey ends and begins for all of us. It’s a place of milk and honey, a place of nourishment, sustenance, abundance, and new and sustained life. Bethlehem draws us into God’s space, into God’s promises, where the living God is present, active, and changing everything we know about the world and ourselves.

### **Scripture No. 5: Luke 2:20 (NRSV)**

The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

### **SERMONETTE No. 5 – *Go Tell It On the Mountain***

You can always tell a person who’s been on this journey. Just look into their eyes. You can see the joy of the Lord within them! You can see the peace of Jesus that runs through them! They’ve come into that God place in their hearts and lives, that resting place, where they know who and whose they are, they know where they’ve come from and where they are going. They know that Jesus is born in them, and they trust that Christ is powering their lives and salving their souls.

Jesus said to us, “My ‘Way’ is easy, my burden light.”

There will be burdens, but Jesus will help us carry them—all the way to Bethlehem and beyond. Let us share and show the good news of great joy! Christ is born. Salvation is here. Light has come. Those living in darkness have seen a great light! Go and tell the good news of our newborn king!

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