

The Understated Birth

Jonathan K. Dodson | Luke 2:1-7 | December 23, 2018

As we reflect on this passage, consider this question: Do you want something *more*? Christmas day is around the corner. There are gifts to unwrap, people to see, memories to make. Maybe you're looking forward to a few days off. If we're honest, we may want *more* than what this story has to offer.

Granted, the passage seems rather *unremarkable*. Joseph is living in Nazareth, a town so unremarkable that when Philip meets Jesus 'of Nazareth' he says, "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" Not like being from Austin. And from this no-name town comes a no-name couple. Can you get any more ordinary than "Mary" and "Joseph"? On top of that, Mary is "with child" but not "with husband." Seems unremarkable.

In contrast, the Roman Caesar Octavius sends out a decree so powerful that "all the world" is to be registered. What he actually meant was the *Roman* world. Powers can be prone to exaggeration. The registration was essentially a census that enabled him to tax his subjects to fund Roman conquest and the Pax Romana, "the peace" of Rome. When I was in Rome touring the Coliseum, I learned the Roman military purposefully overextended themselves to expand the empire. As a result, they lost most battles but the sheer volume of soldiers gave Rome a *larger than life reputation*. Although they stationed soldiers everywhere, it was an *exaggerated* presence. Today, you can pay a few dollars to stroll their dirty monuments, an empire in ruins, *exaggerated* beyond its claims.

Mary and Joseph gather up their things and begin a ninety-mile trek to the Roman province of Syria. When they reach Bethlehem, the city of Israel's most famous king, they can't find a place to stay. Can you imagine? All the hotels booked, even the hostels are full, and you're pregnant! No hospitals. And then, labor pains kick in. They scramble to a cave or stable where we're told Mary does three things with her baby: gives birth, wraps him in swaddling clothes, and lays him in manger. It's all pretty unremarkable—gives birth, wraps him, lays the firstborn in a manger. It's not just unremarkable; it's *understated*. Look again.

"She gave birth"—what? She conceived a child; it gestated for nine months, and from a clump of cells formed a heart, hands, limbs and lungs, survived the

long journey, primitive conditions, and less than sterile environment? Mary gave *birth*, a miracle all its own. We are surrounded by everyday miracles. Babies born; babies who grow, walk, get lanky limbs, run and play. Helpless infants become flurries of activity, a fountain of words, and then start driving. Mary gave birth, not just to *a child*, but to the Son of God.

“She wrapped him”—wrapped what? *God*. Mary wrapped the incarnate Son of God: *the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God* (Lk 1:35). Her womb an incubator for God, a holy of holies, the gate where heaven meets earth as the Spirit conceives in her the Christ child, fully God and fully man. *And she wrapped him*. Years later, she looks up at him, unwrapped, on a cross. Why? Mary wrapped the Son so He can wrap us in a love she could never impart.

“She laid her firstborn in a manger”—her firstborn? Yes, Mary went on to have other children, but it’s fair to say *none like her first*. Of course, every person is unique, down to the labyrinth impressed on every finger, but this child *made* every finger, *all things were made through him* (Col 1:16). Colossians also tells us he *“reconciles all things by the blood of his cross”* (1:23). *Jesus made all people, became one of those people, and then was crucified by his people*. Why? To reconcile us to God. Was that necessary? Absolutely. His creatures, in wanting more than God—settled for less. **We all try to squeeze love out of less, but in Christ, we’re offered infinitely more.** Jesus doesn’t just die; he rises—*“firstborn from the dead”* (1:18)—**to wrap us in his love**. So when you look around this Christmas and see babies, children, people, look through them and thank the One *who made every finger*. And if you don’t see people, missing friends and family, keep looking. As the Christmas paper crinkles, and remember, Jesus died and rose to wrap you in his perfect love. Don’t settle for less.