

In the 15th century,  
the Sacred Order of the Star of Bethlehem  
began to care for sick people in England.  
The ministry eventually evolved  
into a hospital in London,  
Bethlehem Hospital.  
It was one of the first facilities in Britain  
to care for the mentally ill.  
As years passed, ‘Bethlehem’  
got reduced to Bedlam,  
a derogatory name for that hospital.  
That’s how “bedlam” entered the language  
as a scene of wild uproar and confusion.  
The scene in Luke’s Bethlehem manger  
no doubt was also bedlam.

The first 20 verses of the gospel of Luke  
are what most people have in mind  
when they think of the Christmas Story.  
We know it perhaps too well.  
And we have a bad habit of combining Luke  
with Matthew –  
not to mention unbiblical elements  
such as a donkey for Mary to write upon,  
a grumpy old innkeeper,  
and a little drummer boy.  
The passage is undeniably beautiful.  
Listening to it in a beautiful setting,  
glowing with candlelight,  
risks high sentimentality.  
It’s as if we expect the aesthetics alone  
to fix all the pain and sorrow  
we know exists in the world.  
When the Christmas euphoria wears off,  
and life continues on its miserable way,  
what’s left to hold onto in Luke’s account?  
What grace abides?

Luke has crafted the story  
so as to get the players –  
Mary, Joseph, Jesus, and shepherds –  
to Bethlehem in time for a birth  
that fulfills ancient Jewish promises.  
However, the story begins against a backdrop  
of current events in world politics.

“In those days, a decree went out  
from Emperor Augustus...”  
Luke is the only gospel  
that mentions the ruling figures of the day.  
As Luke-Acts unfold, we will meet Quirinius,  
Tiberius, Pilate, and Claudius.  
These figures are not presented as villains  
as Herod is presented in Matthew’s Nativity.  
Caesar Augustus is passed over rather quickly,  
perhaps to show that compared to the Christ,  
Caesar is a bit player.  
Indeed, Caesar is God’s unwitting instrument.  
We see God at work even in places  
that do not at first seem to be miraculous,  
like a universal census, a flock of sheep,  
or a manger – essentially a feed trough.  
But clearly, Luke wants us to see that this child  
is born for the sake of the whole world,  
for all time.  
The Angel sings,  
“I am bringing you good news of great joy  
for all people.”  
No Jewish reader would have missed the fact  
that the baby is born in the city of Bethlehem.  
Isaiah, Micah, and the psalms of David all prophesy  
that the Messiah is to come from Bethlehem.  
Likewise, when they hear that the baby is placed  
among livestock and is visited by shepherds,  
Jewish readers recall that God chose David  
from among the shepherds,  
and took David from tending the nursing ewes  
to be the shepherd of his people Israel.  
Citizens of Judea in biblical times  
would not have missed the import  
of the honorific,  
“a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”  
For only Caesar was to be called Lord.  
Likewise, Roman citizens of the day  
would have had their fill  
of “peace and salvation” –  
propaganda, cranked out by the Emperor.  
One of the bold messages of Christmas  
is that Caesar is not God.

When the Angels fill the skies with  
 "Peace among those whom God favors,"  
 they are setting up a competing world order.  
 That claim might seem rather obvious today,  
 but it was a radical claim for the first Christians.  
 In this tiny child, God comes to dethrone  
 the mighty from places of power and privilege –  
 and to exalt the weak, the outcast,  
 and the seemingly insignificant.  
 God enthrones a new King  
 in this grungy, backwater village.

### **Promises Fulfilled.**

One promise is from our reading from Isaiah 9,  
 a song of hope and triumph for God's people.  
 The text could be a royal birth announcement.  
 As with other fragments of royal theology  
 in the prophets and psalms,  
 we read this prophecy on two levels.  
 First, its function within ancient Israel:  
 It looks ahead to a reunified kingdom.  
 Whole regions will be restored.  
 Second, on a poetic level, the passage describes  
 not simply any King, but the ideal King:  
 A King who rules with wisdom and divine might,  
 as a loving father.  
 A King who brings peace  
 instead of another round of oppression.  
 A King who will actually do  
 what the prophets have demanded:  
 justice, righteousness.  
 “Under this King, there will be no end to the peace.”  
 Jesus Christ is the King  
 who rules in justice and righteousness.  
 Just as Isaiah announced that a royal child  
 has been born “for us,”  
 so the Angels in Luke 2 announce to the shepherds  
 that a Savior has been born “for you.”  
 The Long-Awaited Messiah is here.

We are in what seems to be a perpetual Advent.  
 Today, we are still waiting  
 for the pronouncement of peace and justice  
 in the world.

There are still too many stomping war boots |  
 and too many garments drenched in blood.  
 We still wait for the world  
 to be filled with justice and peace.  
 But God, because of this birth,  
 has not forgotten or abandoned the world  
 to gloom and darkness.  
 God wants salvation for the world so much  
 as to undertake the incarnation.  
 We know that one day this Savior  
 will bring peace and justice to rule.  
 Remember, stars are always shining in the sky.  
 It takes darkness to bring them out.  
 We live in dark times.  
 Not only evil deeds of terrorists and serial killers,  
 but global climate change & economic disruptions  
 seem beyond the power of a precious baby.  
 Dark forces well up within ourselves –  
 suspicion, intolerance, abuse.  
 If “Prince of Peace” is not meant to sound  
 cruelly ironic, the church must hold the light  
 of Christ high against this darkness.  
 To hear the Christmas story correctly,  
 we need to remember that this child  
 will grow up to confront in a real way  
 the power of sin and death.  
 This innocent baby will have to deal with  
 all the cruelty, jealousy, and evil  
 the world can throw his way.  
 This wonder-child of mother Mary  
 will ultimately break her heart.  
 And yet, in this child promises are fulfilled –  
 ancient promises we still cling to.

Sleep in peace, heavenly peace.  
 Amen.