

Home For Christmas “The Role of Family”

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Digging Deeper

Home for Christmas: “The Role of Family”

Written by: Robert Ismon Brown (bbrown@clnaz.org)

Pastor for Care and Senior Ministries, Chicago First Church of the Nazarene

Background Notes

Key Scripture Text(s): Luke 1:78-79, Matthew 1:18; 1:20, 1:38; 1:39-45, Luke 2:1; Matthew 2:1

Introduction

It was the poet Edgar Guest who wrote, “It takes a heap of livin’ to make a house a home.”¹ Nobody contests this sentiment, especially that a house is not necessarily a home. We might want to dress that saying up a bit: “It takes a heap of wisdom to make a house a home.” Guest was pretty clear about what went into the recipe for a genuine home, not the least was the idea that “yer soul is sort o’ wrapped round everything.” He went on, “Ye’ve got to sing an’ dance fer years, ye’ve got t’ romp and play...” And yes, the home must be “sanctified,” and be the place where babies are born, children are brought up good, and “grown into yer heart.” But also, home is the place where tears are shed for a host of reasons, especially when Death’s angel comes. “These are the scenes that grip the heart,” he reminds us, thanks to “pleasant memories.” Some who read Guest’s poem may think he’s just too sentimental and “down home” for their liking. The cockney English might wear on us, but the poet makes his point.

The great Sage of Israel knew the truth about houses and homes when he wrote,

Wisdom has built her house; she has hewn her seven pillars (Proverbs 9:1).

Extending 17 more verses in Proverbs 9, the wisdom saying about Wisdom’s house elaborates the details which presumably provided the pattern for Jewish home construction. The verb form in Hebrew for “built” underscores the complete and lasting nature of the action “built.” This is no temporary dwelling thrown together from flimsy materials, assembled by careless workmen, and according to poor design. Each action ascribed to wisdom carries the same weight: “has hewn,” “has slaughtered,” “has mixed,” “has set,” and “has sent.” Nothing wisdom does is an afterthought or mere improvisation. Wisdom builds her home “in the way of insight” and in “the fear of the Lord” where all her work “begins.” For such a home, “days are multiplied” and “years will be added.”

Children need things in their lives which are stable, reliable, and permanent. The Christian family ought to be the first sanctuary of young human life. Within the safety of such a place, children grow and thrive. In 1975 I was deeply impacted by Edith Schaeffer’s book, *What is A Family?*² She carefully enumerated the essential elements under the following chapter titles:

1. A Changing Life Mobile.
2. An Ecologically Balanced Environment.
3. The Birthplace of Creativity.
4. A Formation Center for Human Relationships.
5. A Shelter in the Time of Storm.
6. A Perpetual Relay of Truth.
7. An Economic Unit.
8. An Educational Unit.
9. A Museum of Memories.
10. A Door That Has Hinges and a Lock.

¹ <https://www.theotherpages.org/poems/guest01.html>

² Currently released by Baker Books.

11. Blended Balances.

I was particularly impressed by chapter 10 which emphasized the safety of living inside such a home. Children need a place where they can express their deepest feelings, vent their frustrations, let down their hair, practice being different kinds of people, and have rich conversations with their parents and each other. The door of such a home has hinges which allow it to open and close — nobody is trapped inside, but the controlling handle is inside. The door has a lock — there are times when only the family belongs inside. Within the context of loving security, true building can take place. Here is the place for teaching, discipline, learning self-control, nourishment, and growth. And here is where children learn what God is truly like. For God also has a house which He is building, and the family is an important room in that bigger, more comprehensive building project called “The People of God.” Lady Wisdom is the guardian of such a house.

In our series “Home for Christmas,” we are thinking of home, not so much as a *dwelling* but a *gathering*. When I am with other people about whom I care deeply, I’m home wherever I am. Granted, the traditional setting for such a gathering is family which in our times has become even more extended than the narrow confines of the traditional nuclear family. The realities of the current pandemic have imposed additional mitigations that limit the thickness of our gatherings, and each community of gathered “home” must use wisdom to sort out what those will actually look like this year.

Of greater interest and importance is the context of *family and home* directly implied by the telling of the Christmas story on the pages of the biblical texts designated for the seasons of *Advent* (November 29-December 24, 2020) and *Christmas* (December 25-January 5, 2020), ending with *Epiphany* on January 6th. Each season has its unique emphasis, whether preparation, nativity, or worship. On *Epiphany*, the Magi’s homage to the Christ child crowns this multi-layered time of celebration where *the gathered community* is everywhere present in the families whose lives engage with the drama of “the Word become flesh and dwelling among us” (John 1:14). In deep and essential ways the participants in the story of Christ’s first coming belong to families, both primary and extended, biological and theological. Our interest will be in observing and sharing with these little communities of devotion, noting their forms of intimacy, care-giving, nurture, protection, and covenantal faith. Their examples, experiences, and engagement with Jesus benefit our own growth in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

To be “Home for Christmas” means immersing our extended selves both natural and neighborly in the great narrative of God’s transforming presence, so that

*Veiled in flesh the Godhead see,
Hail the incarnate Deity,
Pleased as man with man to dwell,
Jesus our Immanuel.*” (Charles Wesley and George Whitefield)

Being home for Christmas in the sense intended by our series means being ripe for discoveries of what life together under new circumstances might look like for us this year. When the family gathers, stuff happens, and not all of it is planned, expected, or joyful. There is not more powerful institution in the world than the family: sometimes transformative, other times explosive. “This story has a dark side. Christmas has its enemy.”³ Our Christmas homecoming may well have its own disruptors. When people get together, things can get messy.

The world into which Jesus was born was a messy world, an uneasy peace kept the hostiles under wraps. Those who dared step onto the redemptive stage were subject to suspicion and violence in the Empire of Rome and the Kingdom of Israel. Caesar and Herod had their own families with agendas to retain and extend power and influence.

³ From the worship team’s planning notes.

It takes Mary (Luke 1:38)

It takes Joseph (Luke 1:20)

It takes the community (Shepherds, Magi, Simeon, Anna) (Luke 2:36-38)

It takes encouragers like Elizabeth and priests like Zechariah (Luke 1)

It takes a Heavenly Father

Don't be discouraged, this family wasn't perfect either. (Mark 3:21). The family is under attack in our culture in many ways today, but the death of the family won't come from the outside, but the inside.

The New Prophet, John; the Lord Most High, Messiah (Luke 1:76-79)

⁷⁶ And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High; for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for him, ⁷⁷ to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, by which the rising sun will come to us from heaven ⁷⁹ to shine on those living in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the path of peace." (Luke 1:76-79).

The holy family whose activities we celebrate during Advent/Christmas had deep rootage in Jewish piety of the first century. Properly kept in focus, the stories we tell during this season reach far back into the remembered past of the great ancestors who received and kept covenant with their Lord Yahweh. Through covenantal faith those forebears eventually imagined a future where God would become more fully joined with His human creation (from their point of view), and they began referring to the advent of the Messiah, God's anointed one. Through the Messiah, the promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would reach fulfillment in the dawning of a new age when the kingdom of God would begin to appear in human history to reflect His perfect will already in charge of the heavens. Through the Messiah, the foreshadowing of this kingdom in David's royal dynasty would lay the foundation for God's own "house," His home among human beings where He would truly be "at home with them."

On one occasion the Lord Yahweh instructed his prophet Nathan to reveal the future of His kingdom to David, His chosen king and forerunner of the Messiah. In that revelation, God used the language of home-building in a much broader sense than a brick and mortar structure, but rather spoke about the house/home that David in his future descendent would become. Notice carefully how that is spelled out in this text from 1 Chronicles:

⁷ "Now then, tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture and from following the flock, to be ruler over my people Israel. ⁸ I have been with you wherever you have gone, and I have cut off all your enemies from before you.

Now I will make *your name* like the names of the greatest men of the earth. ⁹ And I will *provide a place for my people* Israel and will plant them so that they can have a home of their own and no longer be disturbed. Wicked people will not oppress them anymore, as they did at the beginning ¹⁰ and have done ever since the time I appointed leaders over my people Israel. I will also subdue all your enemies. "I declare to you that the LORD will build a house for you:

¹¹ When your days are over and you go to be with your fathers, *I will raise up your offspring to succeed you*, one of your own sons, and I will establish his kingdom. ¹² He is the one who will build a house for me, and I will establish his throne forever. ¹³ I will be his father, and he will be my son. I will never take my love away from him, as I took it away from your predecessor. ¹⁴ I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever.'" (1 Chronicles 17:7-14).

David's "son" for the immediate future would be a man named Solomon and the house/home he would build would be the Temple in Jerusalem. But the language shimmers with greater meaning, especially when the Lord says "I will be his father and he will be my son...I will set him over my house and my kingdom forever; his throne will be established forever." Those statements were not true of Solomon but they were true for the coming One called Messiah. It is the home of Messiah where the Lord God promised to make His dwelling place "forever."

The text for this section of our *Background Notes* comes from a long narrative which begins the Gospel of *Luke*. A large body of background information appears in the 80 verses of Luke 1. We first meet the priest named

Zechariah depicted as faithful to calling through his service in the Temple. While performing his assigned Temple rotation, Zechariah is visited by the angel Gabriel who announces the birth of a son to Elizabeth his wife, even though she is well advanced in years. By the time we reach the end of Luke 1, the child has been born and the priest has the privilege to dedicate him to the Lord in the Temple. In his words of dedication in 1:76-79, Zechariah prays to the Lord and also addressed his infant son, revealing the child's special calling to be the prophet who will precede the Lord Messiah and prepare the way for his coming. Later chapters of Luke tell the story of the adult son, named John, who lays out for Israel during the Jordan River washing rituals that herald salvation and forgiveness of sins. The focus falls on "the tender mercies of God," language which reminds the audience of God as heavenly Father who cares tenderly for the needs of His children. Much of this prayer echoes the language of Isaiah 40 which predicts the coming of Messiah and calls on Israel to get ready for his appearance.

Messiah, in Zechariah's prayer, embodies the mercies of the Father but he also is the light of the world, "the rising sun" who "will come to us from heaven." Messiah shines light in the darkness, in the shadow of death, so that the Lord's people might find their way into the stable condition of peace, of what Jews call *shalom* — "well-being." The prayer paints the picture of the merciful Father, the prophet child, and the sun from heaven. The way Luke records this prayer, with its several references to the Jewish scriptures, imagines a community of "people" with strong family and home images resident in the language. The Christmas home, to which Luke's account of Zechariah's prayer invites us, unites the whole family of God's people, past, present, and future. Zechariah is the earthly father to John his son, while the Lord Most High is the heavenly father to the One who "will come to us from heaven," Jesus Christ our Lord, the Son of God.

Christmas homecoming anticipates a grand reunion of kindred spirits, of ancestors and prophets, of priests and kings, of fathers and sons, of mothers and their miracle children like John. Christmas homecoming is, then, a wondrous season, filled with wonders, the environment where the unexpected happens and the light breaks through the darkness once more. Gathered inside the unbroken circle of this family within this home, the ancestry represented embraces the widest cross-section of the human race reaching into the distant past and forward to the newly imagined future. Priest Zechariah holds his prophet son while praying expectantly for the kingly Messiah who at any moment will make his sunlit arrival in the center of the circle. When that happens, darkness recedes, death flees, and feet find solid ground to move forward into everlasting *shalom*. Now that's a homecoming worth waiting for, joining with, and rejoicing in!

Where Did We Come From?

¹⁷ Thus there were fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Christ.

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Because Joseph her husband was a righteous man and did not want to expose her to public disgrace, he had in mind to divorce her quietly. ²⁰ But after he had considered this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had said through the prophet: ²³ "The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel"--which means, "God with us." (Matthew 1:17-23).

The writer of the gospel bearing his name, *Matthew*, has all the markings of a scribal work, that is, a composition from the pen of a priestly scholar whose job it was to produce sacred texts for the Jewish people. Such persons had many interests and purposes in their writing, not the least of them to make accurate copies of pre-existing manuscripts. However, they were not merely glorified copy machines; they were also researchers, editors, and compilers of literary documents which, in this case, contained faithful witnesses to the Word of God. In ancient Israel, and throughout the ancient Near East, the profession of scribe was especially venerated by many different cultures. Their work was respected and honored. Israel's scribes were originally nurtured within the confines of the royal court where they kept careful records of the proceedings conducted by the king

and his officers. Genealogies — the documentation of family origins — fell under the purview of official scribal duties. Matthew had access, apparently, to the genealogy of Jesus traced through the ancestry of Joseph and included one version of it in Matthew 1:1-16. Furthermore, he also commented on certain mothers within the family tree of Jesus and thereby punctuating what would have been otherwise a bare-bones genealogy. Why did he do this?

It is likely that the several notations all gestured toward the one Matthew really wanted to talk about, namely, the woman named “Mary” who became the mother of Jesus. But for her to become the mother of Jesus was by no means an ordinary affair, and Matthew readily allows for questions from his readers when he writes:

¹⁸ This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about: His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit (Matthew 1:18).

There’s plenty to question about that statement to be sure. However, Matthew had already placed in his genealogy background information to clarify the highly unusual way that Mary conceived Jesus in her womb. That information had to do with certain women who belonged to the ancestral tree of Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Let’s consider the significance of each woman, as well as her contribution to the total impression *Matthew* tries to leave by mentioning them.

1. *Zerah, whose mother was Tamar* (1:3). Tamar’s story appears in Genesis 38 as a sidebar to the intrigue surrounding Joseph’s sale into slavery by his brothers. She plays the harlot and seduces Judah, one of the twelve patriarchs who tries to hide his involvement in her pregnancy, only to exonerate her as “more righteous” than himself (Genesis 38:26). *Though scandalous, her irregular union with Judah does not preclude her child from the royal line.*
2. *Boaz, whose mother was Rahab* (1:5a). Presumably, *Matthew* intends the reader to think of Rahab the harlot who protected the spies at Jericho who in turn protected her at the time of Joshua’s assault against her city. *She is a Canaanite and a harlot, but none of the irregularities prevents her from being part of David’s family tree as the mother of Boaz.*
3. *Obed, whose mother was Ruth* (1:5b). Ruth was a Moabite (see the book of *Ruth*), and Moabites had an incestuous familial past (see Genesis 19:31-38). *But through taking a covenant oath to her mother-in-law Naomi, Ruth frees herself from Moab’s sinful past and marries Boaz with whom she bears Obed in the genealogy of David.*
4. *David and Solomon, whose mother had been Uriah’s wife* (1:6). Uriah’s wife is Bathsheba, a Hittite, and the adulterous lover of David the King about whom the genealogy has been up to this point. *Although her relationship with David was highly irregular, this did not prevent her from bearing a child who would become king in Israel.*
5. *Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom was born Jesus, who is called Christ* (1:16). By the time the reader arrives at the birth of Jesus, nothing about the circumstances of his conception should be shocking in the flow of royal Jewish history, *even if Mary lived with the scandal of an illegitimate pregnancy, which as a matter of historical record she did.*

If Matthew had chosen to do so, he could easily have added more instances, but these suffice to make his argument. *Anyone who challenged Jesus’ legitimacy in the family tree from Abraham and David would need to dismiss four pregnancies which preceded him in Matthew’s account of his origins.*

All of which is to say, there’s nothing normal about the roots of Christ the King, and the Christian tradition persisted in saying of Jesus, “He was born of the Virgin Mary...” To put it mildly, the birth of Jesus was not regular or normal, as if God wanted to get in our faces through the outrageous claim that His Son appeared in human history without the predictable reproductive mechanics of nature. This is an uncomfortable narrative, full of reminders about Israel’s past and its messy present. Scandal surrounded the telling of the whole story of Jesus, and the opponents of Jesus knew about the shadowy circumstances of his conception and birth. From John 8:19 we hear the rumors in the question put to Jesus by his detractors: “Where is your father?” which isn’t exactly an innocent inquiry but a sly dig at Jesus’ origins. Then sarcasm intensifies when these critics snarl: “We are not illegitimate children” (8:41), implying, “But you are!” Further, from the writings of the church

father Origen (3rd century CE) in his debates with the philosopher Celsus, we hear about the popular beliefs concerning Jesus' beginnings. Here is scandalous gossip elevated to the level of fact:

... he came from a Jewish village and from a poor country woman who earned her living by spinning. He says that she was driven out by her husband, who was a carpenter by trade, as she was convicted of adultery. Then he says that after she had been driven out by her husband and while she was wandering about in a disgraceful way she secretly gave birth to Jesus. And he says that because he was poor he hired himself out as a workman in Egypt, and there tried his hand at certain magical powers on which the Egyptians pride themselves; he returned full of conceit because of these powers, and on account of them gave himself the title of God. . . . Let us return, however, to the words put into the mouth of the Jew, where the mother of Jesus is described as having been turned out by the carpenter who was betrothed to her, as she had been convicted of adultery and had a child by a certain soldier named Panthera. (Origen, *Against Celsus*. 1.28, 32).

Later Rabbis also perpetuated the scandal by referencing the man Panthera as Jesus' true father (see a full treatment of this topic by Daniel C. Harlow, "Born of Fornication," in *Portraits of Jesus: Studies in Christology*, edited by Susan E. Meyers (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2012), 335–53).

Responding to such rumors, *Matthew* cleverly reminds his audience that in the family tree from Abraham to David there were no less than four women involved with irregular relationships. Even if the stories about Jesus proved true (something *Matthew* denies by what he tell us in 1:18ff), that would by no means be unusual within the royal genealogy leading to King David. *Why then, he implies, would it be unusual for God's royal Son, Jesus, to arrive in the world under the cloud of an irregular union?* Again, I present this argument without necessarily accepting the claims of Jesus' critics.⁴

The inclusion of *brothers* names in the genealogy widens its mystery. Unlike Luke's presentation, *Matthew* twice points out *brothers* as being part of the genealogy. While this is not necessary in presenting the descendants of Christ, it is however possible that *Matthew* has an interest in presenting God's people as a band of brothers, or brotherhood of people that can later be translated to the Church.

The inclusion of *Gentiles* is also relevant to a deeper understanding of Jesus' family tree. In *Matthew* 1:5, we read that Rahab was the mother of Boaz. Besides being a prostitute (an unimaginably wicked person under the Law), Rahab was also a Canaanite. Ruth, a Moabitess is also described as the mother of Obed, paralleled by *Ruth* 4:9-22, where we noticed Ruth's association with Tamar. At last, but not least, *Matthew* lists Basheeba as the mother of Solomon (v. 5), but he makes sure to point out that unlike 1 Chr. 3:5, where "Bathshua" is described as "the daughter of Ammiel" she is described as being "the wife of Uriah." By marriage to a Hittite, she has taken on the status of a Gentile, furthermore committing adultery with David. It seems as if *Matthew* is greatly emphasizing the importance of not only Gentiles in the genealogy of Jesus, but sinners as well.

There is mystery in the family tree of Jesus, and it includes the honest truth about skeletons in the closet that turn out to be common flaws of human beings. Just as King David descended from a real human lineage, marked by irregular persons, so also Jesus accepts the givens of his human ancestry. *Matthew* is not shy about his inclusion of specific names that heighten the mystery of Christ the King. That the gospel writer should begin his gospel immediately with a family tree answers to the unalloyed need of Jews to know what kind of King this Jesus is, where his human roots began, what character(s) he bears, and which royalty will shape his kingdom.

Further, the idea that tarnished reputations garnish the family tree of Jesus is not at all inconsistent with Christian belief that the incarnation of Jesus included his identification with all sorts of "sinners," since he came to save "sinners." Or, as he once put it, "I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance" (*Matthew* 9:13; *Mark* 2:17; *Luke* 5:32). Jesus died for sinners, having been born from sinners. Whatever else

⁴ My former professor and mentor, Andrew T. Lincoln, has recently published a book titled, *Born of a Virgin?: Reconceiving Jesus in the Bible, Tradition, and Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2013) in which he pursues a different literary angle on the Gospel accounts.

we might say about the sinlessness of Jesus, it should not minimize his ancestral solidarity with persons who are sinners like ourselves. Matthew's genealogy makes that statement through mentioning his special cast of characters. God is in no wise hindered in His promises by the failures of human beings, when in fact we consider that such failure is the real reason for making the promises in the first place.

The *Homecoming Christmas* involves equally authentic promises made to real human beings under the circumstances of concrete human existence whether perfect or not. And, as the family tree by Matthew suggests, usually it's *not perfect*. If readers feel uncomfortable with those implications, *Matthew* offers them yet another literary activity to ease their anxiety: he performs some math on his family tree and shows how the generations are neatly broken into three periods, each of them *fourteen generations* in length. They are: 1) Abraham to David; 2) David to the exile; 3) the exile to the Messiah. Why *fourteen*? Apparently, Matthew the Christian scribe wanted to unpack the numeric code for the Hebrew name *David* which consists of just three consonants (*dwd*) that add up to 14 in the Hebrew language, using the methods of gematria (*daleth*=4 and *waw* (or *vav*)=6; 4+4+6=14). History is messy, as family trees reveal, and yet God has purpose in how He unfolds history through the promises He makes to people — even those like Tamar, Rahab, etc. Right down to the conception of Jesus, where the scandalous shadows fall, God orders and directs human steps toward a divine end. *The symmetry of the fourteen generations as explained by Matthew communicates the idea of divine purpose*. Welcome to one more *mystery* in Matthew's telling of his story!

Let's summarize why Matthew made a point of specifying the number of generations? Simply put, genealogy and numerology were important to 1st century Jews as they are to most people throughout history. It's vital that the Messiah descend from Abraham and David. So Matthew recorded the lineage from Abraham to David and from David to Jesus. When he did so, he must have noticed that there was roughly the same number of men from the birth of the Jewish people to its height, as from the rise of the Jewish kingdom to its end, as from the Babylonian captivity to the birth of Jesus. The image that Matthew invokes is that of a deep plan in human history purposed by God and culminating in the person of Jesus. It is the story of the rise and fall of a people and the redemption of that story when a new "King of the Jews" was born. We are meant to be reminded of the very familiar names that take up the bulk of Jesus' genealogy and remember their triumphs and failures.

Our human families have their own sketchy histories from family trees spotted with imperfections. Extend the concepts of *family* and *home* to include the community of Jesus, our neighbors, co-workers, and friends — widen the circle of the those home for Christmas to include otherwise strangers and the less fortunate — and you will see "how the birth of Jesus came about" is a reflection of how each of us "comes about" when we are numbered among families with irregular beginnings.

Who Does it Take for a Christmas Home? (Luke 1:18-45, esp. 1:20, 1:38; 1:39-45)

¹⁸ Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years." ¹⁹ The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. ²⁰ And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time." ²¹ Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. ²² When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak. ²³ When his time of service was completed, he returned home. ²⁴ After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. ²⁵ "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

²⁶ In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷ to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰ But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹ You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³² He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, ³³ and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end." ³⁴ "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to

be born will be called the Son of God. ³⁶ Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. ³⁷ For nothing is impossible with God." ³⁸ "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.

³⁹ At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, ⁴⁰ where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. ⁴² In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! ⁴³ But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? ⁴⁴ As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ Blessed is she who has believed that what the Lord has said to her will be accomplished!" (Luke 1:18-45).

The phrase "holy family" became common usage during *Advent* and *Christmastide* during the earliest centuries of Christian practice. How far we widen the circle of "family" in this designation depends on what material we are reading from the gospel accounts. As noted above, Matthew evidently wanted to make sure the whole history of Jesus' ancestry was in solidarity with his birth family, and so he begins with an annotated genealogy in Matthew 1. When we move to Luke's account, comprising Luke 1-2, the breadth is breath-taking, for we include the lateral family of Zechariah and Elizabeth, as well as mother Mary and guardian Joseph. Luke then includes other persons like Anna and Simeon who take a keen interest in Jesus at his Temple dedication where they speak words of acknowledgment and wonder. And we can't forget baby John whose future vocation as way-preparer is foreshadowed in his father's prayer of dedication. They also—all of them — belong to the community around Jesus that comprises his true *home*. If we want implications for our own current year celebrations, perhaps we ought to look around us for those who have a stake in the gospel story of Christ's birth, whether as seekers, finders, or waiters. They might be neighbors, indigent, immigrants, marginalized, or simply those "left out." The Church embodies people like these, opens its doors for them, welcomes their arrival, and praises God with the angels when the lost among them *come home for Christmas*.

Zechariah

By all accounts he was an ordinary priest with a regular schedule of service in the Jewish Temple. He held no special titles. Our reading from Luke 1 picks up his story at the crucial moment when Zechariah must decide if his encounter with the angel Gabriel is legitimate and should be trusted. A little backstory from the same context is useful at this point, and so here's the complete text:

⁵ In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. ⁶ Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. ⁷ But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years. ⁸ Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, ⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. ¹⁰ And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside. ¹¹ Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. ¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. ¹³ But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. ¹⁴ He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, ¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. ¹⁶ Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. ¹⁷ And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord." (Luke 1:5-17).

To observant Jews this account bears striking resemblance to the story of Abraham and Sarah in the book of *Genesis*. These two ancestors are the fountainhead of Israelite faith, the founders of the community in covenant with Lord Yahweh. Like them, Zechariah and Elizabeth were well advanced in years when they are given a promise of a child, an heir, to fulfill the purposes of God for His people. Gabriel appears to Zechariah with promises about a son, filled with the Holy Spirit from his mother's womb, and whose mission is to "bring back to the Lord their God" the people of Israel, doing the work of Elijah the prophet (see Malachi 4:5-6). Hearing such an announcement would understandably raised questions for Zechariah which he proceeds to ask the angel. In reply Gabriel gives him the "sign of silence" in evidence that his words are true. The loss of speech stays

with Zechariah until the birth and naming of his son months later. Elizabeth has her own sign in the baby forming in her womb, her testimony that “The Lord has done this for me...shown his favor...taken away my disgrace.” She has for all intents experienced the miracle of her great forebear Sarah who birthed Isaac in her old age. Granting a barren woman the ability to have children was a sign of favor among Israel’s ancestors, but also His indication that some new and wonderful plan was about to unfold for the whole nation of Israel. Miracles have a home within families who become witnesses to the mighty deeds of God. Homes are the environments where individual lives receive the blessing of God and then share its joy with the whole family.

Clearly, from the account in Luke 1, Zechariah and Elizabeth belonged to the wider family of their Judean family represented by the worshippers who gathered around the holy place where incense was offered mingled with the prayers they voiced. This community of persons took keen interest in what was happening to Zechariah even as Elizabeth was keenly aware that others would be favorably disposed toward her once her pregnancy became known to them. That said, Elizabeth created space for herself to soak in the words of the angel and the child growing in her body. In homes at Christmas, there is a time for fellowship with others, but also a time for privacy alone with God. Perhaps that’s the big challenge of our culture where the public festivity can easily suppress the personal formation in personal faith practices. With Zechariah we learn that the words from the Lord “will come true at their proper time.”

Famous People Who Haven’t a Clue (Luke 2:1; Matthew 2:1)

In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. ² (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) ³ And everyone went to his own town to register. ⁴ So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵ He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. (Luke 2:1-5).

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." ³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. (Matthew 2:1-3).

Casting a broad shadow over the Christmas story told in the Bible is not the home or the community where persons of faith share in the fellowship of God’s covenant with His beloved people Israel. Instead there looms large the every-present activity of the Empire much in evidence in two texts from Luke 2 and Matthew 2 cited above. Empires view homes and communities as means to an end, as sometimes annoyances to be dealt with or as resources to be plundered. While that assessment might be too cynical for us in our time, it was quite accurate during the “days of Caesar Augustus” or “Herod, King of the Jews.” Caesar—this Caesar—ruled over a far-flung region with many occupied kingdoms under his authority to whom he granted privileges, exacted revenue, and expected homage. He proclaimed *Pax Romana*, the Roman peace, throughout his realms, a policy of law and order through securing borders and keeping revolts from happening. Within the constraints of his rule, the world of Jewish life did its best to form families, make homes, and foster friendship under the covenant provisions of their faith.

One more layer of authority affected Jewish life during the times of Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. That additional factor was the puppet dynasty of Herod the Great to whom Rome permitted the title, “King of the Jews.” He was by all accounts both loved and hated by Jews since he had no real Jewish roots for his kingship, not having descended from the line of David or any other recognizable royal rootage. His story is one of power and opportunism, coupled with considerable skill in war. This later competency made him useful to emperors like Augustus, especially because Israel was located adjacent to the eastern frontiers of the Empire. In exchange for the privilege of being king, Herod promises to use his considerable experience on the battlefield to keep the peace on the eastern border, particularly through suppressing the military adventurism of the fierce Parthian hordes. Moreover, Herod had administrative talent and the passion of a builder whose crowning achievement in the eyes of the Jews was the renovation of the Temple district with the newly built Temple at its center. This Temple became a wonder of the world with its gold-gilded detailing. Jews hated to love Herod, the more

devout ones saw him a menace to faith and practice, while the cultural ones relished his royal tastes and designs.

And so, Rome made its home in the Empire, while Herod made his in projects like the Temple. The average Jews may well have benefitted from the brokered relationship between Empire and kingdom, Caesar and Herod, but they felt no genuine affection for either one. "Live and let live" became the motto of the priestly community. It's hard to imagine devout Zechariah or Elizabeth joining the praise of empire or kingdom since their hearts were about to be turned toward another kingdom making a home for humble persons like them.

When Luke and Matthew include Caesar and Herod in their narratives, they do so without homage. Luke sets up his account of what brought Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem for the birth of Jesus by identifying the census commissioned under Caesar Augustus. Having credited the census for the pair's arrival in the prophesied town of Messiah's birth, Luke abruptly drops any further mention of the Roman emperor who simply becomes a footnote to a much bigger story he wants to tell. Of greater importance is that Caesar had literally no knowledge that Jesus the son of God and Messiah of Israel would be born in Bethlehem as a result of his census decree. The birth of Jesus Christ, a man who would dramatically alter the course of history, happened under the nose of the most powerful man in the Mediterranean world without him ever knowing it. Augustus didn't have a clue that the house of God would take shape in a crude stable with its throne a feeding trough. Powerful Caesar made his home in a palace that would one day collapse; Jesus would make his home among the likes of Zechariah, Elizabeth, Joseph, Mary, shepherds, and the ordinary folk of Israel, and that home would become the church where the gates of Hades itself could not prevail.

Herod, in Matthew's story, takes intense interest in the claims of visiting foreigners called "Magi." He takes interest because they seek a newborn child whose identity is "king of the Jews," the very title used by King Herod himself. Herod's backstory is a mix of unpleasantness for he was not a nice man. Paranoid to the fault, Herod would be "freaking out" when hearing about another king with a claim to his throne. A little bit about Herod is in order here. His life commenced a dynasty of rulers which ended with the fall of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. He ruled Israel during 37 to 4 B.C.E. (born in 73), known as Herod the Great. His dynasty ended in the fourth generation with Herod Agrippa II before whom St. Paul made his famous speech recorded in the book of *Acts*. Herod the Great constructed a kingdom based on compromise with the Romans and nervous accommodation with the Jewish leadership. His building projects enhanced Jewish standing in the Roman world, but lost him support among the devout. His paranoia was well-known, and his willingness to kill members of his own family to protect his rule was equally famous. That is why Matthew's account of Herod's order to slaughter the innocents seems authentic. He was capable of such brutality for his own interests.

Having fought the Parthians in the East, Herod probably had moments of pause when the Magi arrived in Jerusalem, speaking about a "king of the Jews" newly born. Did he suspect a conspiracy against his kingdom? More than likely. Might it be inspired by his old Parthian nemesis? Perhaps. Matthew describes Herod's response with the word "startled", from the Greek, *tarasso*, a word implying a deeply unsettled state of mind. And not only Herod, but also Jerusalem shared this anxiety. It had been during the 7-4 B.C.E. timeframe that Herod had executed his sons Aristobulus and Antipater. No doubt this was fresh on everyone's mind. If Herod was unhappy, we might say, everybody is unhappy!

Inquiring from the chief priests and legal experts, Herod wants to know "where" the Messiah was suppose to be born. Not, mind you, because he cared to do homage to him as he claimed, but, as the text later records, because he had designs on the life of the child much as he had eliminated his own two sons. Here is stark irony. King Herod wants the word of scripture so that he can execute his deadly scheme against the Christ child. And he is more than willing to manipulate the religious authorities to do so. That Herod needs experts from his intelligence community (the scribes) to tell him where Messiah would be born is ironic: the king who had everything didn't have a clue about Jesus without asking.

Readers of the story form a fast impression of the man Herod. Manipulative, paranoid, scheming, he exploits the extent of power for his own purposes. Once the Magi quietly slip out of town, he does not hesitate to enforce a massacre of male children two years and younger. His conduct parallels that of Pharaoh who, at the time of Moses' birth, systematically eliminated Hebrew boys (see Exodus 1:15-22). Is Matthew making a point here? Is he saying that Herod has become the "new Pharaoh of the oppression"? If so, he rules in Israel and not in Egypt! It is Jesus, and not Moses, in this case, whose life is in danger. Ironically, when Joseph takes Mary and the child Jesus and flees from Judea, he chooses Egypt as his destination! Our writer is sending a series of coded messages to his readers. He is telling them that Israel has become a place of oppression, ruled by Herod the Great, a king in league with imperial Rome. From this place, Matthew seems to be saying, Jesus must flee (as did Moses), until such a time as God decides, and then he will return for the long-term purpose of delivering his people. Clearly Herod's world is not a home where Jesus or the holy family will be welcome.

In our previous *Background Notes*, we have already addressed the story of the flight to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents by Herod. Our reference to those events here simply underscore the cruelty of Herod, a man drunk with power, and also the remarkable providence of God in, 1) warning the Magi through a dream to avoid Herod on their return trip to the East, and 2) warning Joseph in a dream to take Mary and the child to Egypt. Herod is outwitted on both accounts. For the possession of power is no promise of the presence of God. Instead, the whole Herod-Magi narrative reveals God's overarching purpose to set aside the Herodian dynasty and replace it with the righteous rule of the one "born king of the Jews". The chief priests and scribes may have correctly provided information for Herod on the birthplace of the Christ child. But when it truly mattered, the Magi showed greater evidence of faith in the unfolding purposes of God. They saw the star. To them was given insight into its meaning. And, when the life of the child was in danger, they were given yet one more divine message to guide their journey. They saw light rise above the darkness of Herod's court. They saw Jesus, the light of the world.

At every turn, Matthew places the willing participants in his story "on the road". Consider the Magi's itinerary: the East, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the East. Or that of the holy family: Bethlehem, Egypt, Nazareth. Those who are in tune with the salvation plan of God receive his guidance. Herod, on the other hand, clinging tenaciously to the throne, watches helplessly from the sidelines, unable to subvert any of God's good plans for His pilgrim people. For "the light shines in the darkness and the darkness cannot overcome it." *God's people are a home for pilgrims. Among God's people others can find a home on the journey at whatever stage with whatever provisions in their hands.*

*Herod refused to make a home for Jesus, but instead sought to take his life. The Magi wanted a home for Jesus and brought gifts as signs of his hopeful future. Mary and Joseph protected a home for Jesus even if that meant leaving their own homeland, at least for a time, and settling in Egypt. In sign and symbol the biblical writer implies that when Jesus is present with the holy family, there is a home. Herod didn't have a clue about any other kind of home but the ones he built for himself. Ironically his interest in Jesus grew out of sheer paranoia: he feared the kind of home Jesus might build because he feared the loss of his own home. For Herod, home was something he built and therefore something he *controlled*. The home Jesus would build slipped from Herod's grasp. Not even the foreign Magi would be cajoled into aiding his scheme to eliminate Jesus. When Jesus is at home with us, no earthly ruler can rob us of our joy, our love, or our trust. Perhaps Christmas homecoming this year will feel more like Egypt than Jerusalem, more like a strange place and less like home. Just remember, where Jesus is present in our midst, God makes for us His home.*

Conclusion

The British Catholic journalist, G. K. Chesterton also wrote poetry. In the one printed below, he crafts a lovely sobering line, "For men are homesick in their homes," and then teases out rich meaning intertwined with the Christmas narrative. Take some time to read and reflect on his understanding of the title "The House of Christmas."

The House of Christmas

G. K. Chesterton

There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home.
The crazy stable close at hand,
With shaking timber and shifting sand,
Grew a stronger thing to abide and stand
Than the square stones of Rome.

For men are homesick in their homes,
And strangers under the sun,
And they lay on their heads in a foreign land
Whenever the day is done.
Here we have battle and blazing eyes,
And chance and honour and high surprise,
But our homes are under miraculous skies
Where the yule tale was begun.

A Child in a foul stable,
Where the beasts feed and foam;
Only where He was homeless
Are you and I at home;

Chesterton brings realism to his lyrics by describing the times when he wrote:

*This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;*

When “plain things” become strange, the world has become wild. Sound like what we are going through these days leading up to Christmas? Resources like earth and air fund both “wonder and war.” They are the stuff of life’s persistent contradictions, the raw material for the good and the bad. And they may well express how each of us feels as we figure out how to gather in our Christmas homes this year. Yet there is another side, one that defies the possible and dares to go another way:

*But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.*

*To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
To an older place than Eden
And a taller town than Rome.
To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
And all men are at home*

We have hands that fashion and heads that know,
But our hearts we lost - how long ago!
In a place no chart nor ship can show
Under the sky's dome.

This world is wild as an old wives' tale,
And strange the plain things are,
The earth is enough and the air is enough
For our wonder and our war;
But our rest is as far as the fire-drake swings
And our peace is put in impossible things
Where clashed and thundered unthinkable wings
Round an incredible star.

To an open house in the evening
Home shall men come,
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To the end of the way of the wandering star,
To the things that cannot be and that are,
To the place where God was homeless
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Chesterton invokes the image of the “fire-drake,” another word for “dragon,” with its long wagging tail, a mythical creature. Thinking about the mythical is one way of thinking about the incredible, the impossible, the fantastical. These words are appropriate ways to imagine the “other way” for making homes during Christmas. The poet urges his readers to “imagine” the unimaginable by reading the lines of the Christmas story where angels and a star join to tell the story of Jesus. Key words anchor the stanza: “our rest,” “our peace,” “unthinkable wings,” “clashed,” “incredible star.” He gathers the might of the cosmic dragon and throws it into space where a star and angels clash and thunder. Listen to nativity’s shock and awe magnified to mythic proportions! All of which, he writes in the next verse, invites us “to an open house in the evening” where “home shall men come.” From the cosmic heights of the heavens, the poet takes us home again, and yet this home has been transformed “to an older place than Eden, taller town than Rome.” Eden is the place of beginning and of the fall into sin. Rome is the high and mighty empire with its imperial peace and powerful emperor. Neither place is home, says the poet. For home we must travel “to the end of the way of the wandering star” — the star of Bethlehem, that is. For home we must imagine “the things that cannot be and that are” — the impossibility of Mary the virgin having a baby, that is. For home we must kneel in “the place where God was homeless” — the stable, manger, and the babe lying there, that is. If we come “to the end, to the things, to the place...” we will discover God is there and “all men are at home.”

May God bring you this season, hard as the times might be, “to the place where God was homeless / And all men are at home.” Impossible? Of course it is, for Christmas happened to make impossible things possible...things like *home* in times like these. People like *families* who want to stay well while being together. Sound insane? Remember the dragon. And then remember the angels and the star, and the babe in the manger. Remember Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary, Caesar and Herod. Whose home would you like to visit this Christmas? What sort of home would you like to imagine and then create this Christmas?

Glory to God! Amen.