





NATIVITY SCENE BY BERNARDINUS, INDISUR FROM ISTOCKPHOTO/THINKSTOCK

By Elder
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Of the Seventy



COME, LET US ADORE HIM

Whatever binds us—sins, circumstances, or past events—the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Immanuel, has come to set us free.

More than 700 years before the birth of Jesus Christ, Isaiah prophesied of Him in words memorialized by George Frideric Handel in *The Messiah* oratorio: “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder: and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counsellor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace” (Isaiah 9:6).

Handel’s *Messiah* also brings to glorious musical life the following admonition, based on Isaiah 40:9: “O thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, . . . O thou that tellest good tidings to Jerusalem, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!”¹

Behold your God, born as a babe in Bethlehem and wrapped in swaddling clothes. Behold your God, born in poverty and simplicity that He might walk among common people as a common man. Behold your God, even the infinite and eternal Redeemer, veiled in flesh and come to live upon the very earth He had created.

Return with me to that sacred first Christmas in Bethlehem to contemplate the birth of our Lord. He came in the quiet of the night, in the meridian of time, He who is Immanuel (see Isaiah 7:14), the Stem of Jesse (see Isaiah 11:1), the Dayspring (see Luke 1:78), the Lord Almighty



(see 2 Corinthians 6:18). His birth marked the promised visitation of the Creator to the earth, the condescension of God to man (see 1 Nephi 11:16–27). As Isaiah wrote of the event, “The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light: they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined” (Isaiah 9:2).

We know from modern revelation that the foreordained King of Israel came to earth in the springtime (see D&C 20:1). Micah prophesied that He would be born in Bethlehem—“little among the thousands of Judah” (Micah 5:2). The village of His birth lay in the shadow of mighty Jerusalem, which was five miles (8 km) to the north. Jerusalem was the capital city of Judaea, seat of the temple and bastion of Roman power. Bethlehem, by contrast, was a pastoral town, homespun and agrarian. Its only claim to fame was as the birthplace of David, the ancient king of Israel through whose lineage Christ would be born; hence, the little village was commonly known as the City of David. Its Hebrew name, *Beth Lechem*, meant “house of bread,”² a name that was of no particular significance until He who would be known as the Bread of Life was born.

The fields surrounding Bethlehem were home to numerous flocks of sheep, and early

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spring was the traditional birthing season. The shepherds would have stayed up most nights, tending their sheep beneath the crystal night sky; hence, the angels who heralded the Savior’s birth would have had no need to wake them.

The Lamb of God

The boy child who arrived that birthing season is known as “the Lamb of God” (John 1:29; 1 Nephi 11:31; D&C 88:106). It is a title of deep significance, for He arrived with the lambs and would someday be “brought as a lamb to the slaughter” (Isaiah 53:7). Yet paradoxically, He was also the Good Shepherd (see John 10:11), one who cares for the lambs. Thus, these twin symbols of His life represent both those who serve and those who are served. It was only right that Christ should play both roles, for in life He “descended below all things” (D&C 88:6), and in eternity He “ascended up on high” and is in and through and “round about all things” (D&C 88:6, 41). He knew life from every side and every angle, both above and below. He who was the greatest made Himself the least—the Heavenly Shepherd who became the Lamb.

His coming was more than simply the birth of a great prophet, the advent of a

promised heir to the royal throne, or even the arrival of the only perfect person who would ever walk the earth. It was the coming of the God of heaven “to walk upon his footstool and be like man, almost.”³

Jesus Christ is the Creator of the world and the Great Jehovah of the Old Testament. It was His voice that resounded on Mount Sinai, His power that upheld chosen Israel in its wanderings, and His presence that revealed to Enoch, Isaiah, and all the prophets the glory of things to come. And therein lies the greatest miracle of the Nativity: when the God and Creator of heaven and earth first revealed Himself in person to the world, He chose to do so as an infant—helpless and dependent.

An ancient Hebrew tradition held that the Messiah would be born at Passover. We know that April in the meridian of time indeed fell in the week of the Passover feast—that sacred Jewish commemoration of Israel’s salvation from the destroying angel that brought death to the firstborn sons of Egypt. Each Israelite family that sacrificed a lamb and smeared its blood on the wooden doorposts of their dwelling was spared (see Exodus 12:3–30). Thirty-three years after Christ’s Passover birth, His blood was smeared on the wooden posts of a cross to save His people from the destroying angels of death and sin.

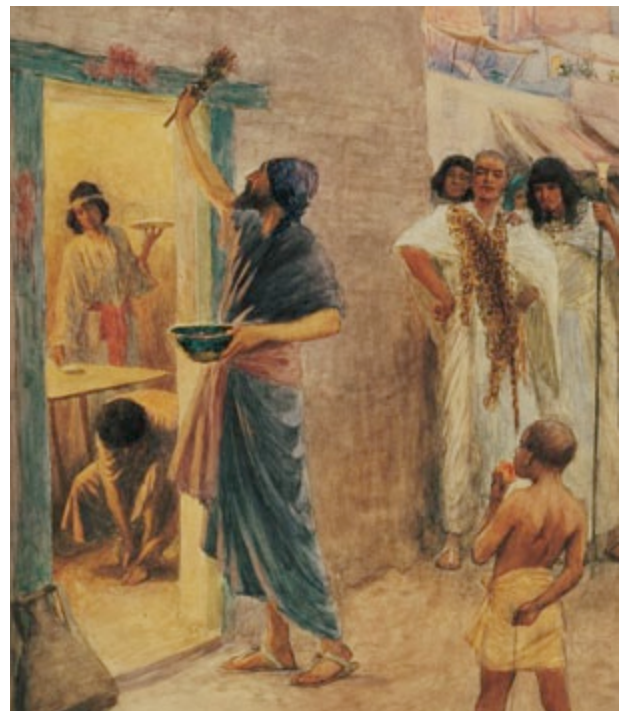
The Passover feast may have been the reason there was no room at the inn for Mary and Joseph. The population of Jerusalem swelled by tens of thousands during Passover, forcing travelers to seek accommodations in outlying towns. Mary and Joseph went to Bethlehem, the home of Joseph’s forefathers, to fulfill the requirements of an imperial census ordered by

Caesar Augustus. The requirement of the census allowed them to make their appearance in Bethlehem anytime during the year, but they likely chose the Passover season because the Mosaic law required all males to present themselves in Jerusalem at Passover.⁴ Because Bethlehem was virtually next door to the Holy City, the couple from Nazareth could take care of two obligations at once.

The innkeeper has come down in history as somewhat notorious. Yet given the crowding throughout the region during Passover, we can hardly blame him for having no room to offer the couple from Nazareth. While the majority of Passover pilgrims camped out in thousands of tents pitched on the plains around Jerusalem, thousands of others sought refuge in the local inns, known as caravansaries or khans. The Bethlehem inn was no doubt overflowing, and the innkeeper’s offering of the stable was likely an act of genuine kindness.

Even had the couple found room in the inn, it would have offered only primitive accommodations. A typical

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khan of the period was a stone structure consisting of a series of small rooms, each with only three walls and open to public view on one side. The stable, however, was likely a walled courtyard or even a limestone cave, where animals belonging to the guests were kept.⁵ Whether in courtyard, cave, or other refuge, Christ's birth among the animals did have one conspicuous advantage over the crowded interior of an inn: here at least were peace and privacy. In this sense, the offering of the stable was a blessing, allowing the most sacred birth in human history to take place in reverent solitude.

Liberty to the Captives

Seven hundred years before that first Christmas, the prophet Isaiah penned a messianic prophecy that the Savior later read to His fellow villagers of Nazareth: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound" (Isaiah 61:1; see also Luke 4:18–19).

When we read of Christ's mission to proclaim liberty to the captives and open the prison to those who are bound, we probably think first of His ministry in the spirit world among the dead. *But we are all captive*—captive to the corruption and weakness of mortal bodies and subject to the temptations of the flesh, to infirmity, and, ultimately, to death—*and we all have need to be set free*.

Whatever binds us—sins, circumstances, or past events—the Lord Jesus Christ, the great Immanuel, came to set us free. He proclaims liberty to the captives and freedom from the bonds of death and the prison of sin, ignorance, pride, and error. It was prophesied that He would say to the prisoners, "Go forth" (Isaiah 49:9). The only condition of our freedom is that we come unto Him with broken hearts and contrite spirits, repent, and seek to do His will.

About 30 years ago I met a man whom I will call Thomas. He was 45 years old when I met him. Twenty years earlier his parents had joined the Church. Thomas

had no interest in his parents' new religion. But his parents loved him, and they treasured the hope that someday their son might be brought to know the truth of the restored gospel. As the years passed, they tried many times to persuade him to at least meet with the missionaries and hear their message. He refused again and again, and he mocked his parents for their religious faith.

One day in desperation his mother said, "Thomas, if you will take the missionary discussions one time, then I will never again talk to you about the Church." Thomas decided this was a good bargain and agreed to meet with the missionaries. During the first three discussions, he simply sat there full of pride, occasionally making fun of what the elders were teaching.

During the fourth discussion, about the Atonement of Jesus Christ and the first principles of the gospel, Thomas said nothing but grew unusually silent and listened closely. At the end of the lesson, the elders bore their testimonies of the Savior. One of the missionaries then felt prompted to open his Bible and read these words:

"Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.

"Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls" (Matthew 11:28–29).

Without warning, Thomas burst into tears. "Are you trying to say that Christ can forgive me of *my* sins?" he asked. "I have lived a terrible life. I am haunted by the memory of my sins. I would do anything to be freed of the guilt I feel."

His pride had been a facade that hid a soul captive to sin and guilt. The elders assured Thomas that Christ would forgive him and free him from the burden of guilt if he would but repent and be baptized and confirmed. Then they bore testimony of the power of the Atonement. From that moment on, everything changed in Thomas's life. He had much to repent of and to overcome, but through the blessings of the Lord, he qualified for baptism.

More than 20 years later, as I sat in the chapel of the Frankfurt Germany Temple, a gray-haired man in front



of me turned around and said, “Aren’t you Elder Porter?” To my great joy, I recognized Thomas—a man freed from bondage by the power of Jesus Christ and still faithful in the Lord’s Church.

Perhaps this Christmas season we might each resolve to approach our Father in Heaven humbly in prayer and petition the power of His Beloved Son to be with us in our daily walk and to free us from our personal forms of captivity, great or small.

O Holy Night

In December 1987, about two weeks before Christmas, I traveled to Israel on business. Unfortunately, it was not a peaceful time in the Holy Land. There were demonstrations in the West Bank, the streets of Old Jerusalem were deserted, and the shops were boarded up. Political tension filled the air, and to make matters worse, a cold rain drizzled most of the week. Fearful of violence, tourists stayed away in droves. Yet as I walked through Jerusalem, peace filled my heart to know that this was the city the Redeemer loved so much.

I returned to the United States late on the Friday before Christmas. When the Sabbath dawned two days later, my alarm woke me to the music of “O Holy Night”:

Perhaps this Christmas season we might each resolve to approach our Father in Heaven humbly in prayer and petition the power of His beloved Son to be with us in our daily walk and to free us from our personal forms of captivity, great or small.

*The King of kings lay thus in lowly manger,
In all our trials born to be our friend.⁶*

The music and message pierced me deeply, and tears flowed as I contemplated the glorious sacrifice and perfect life of the Redeemer of Israel—He who was born to be the friend of the lowly and the hope of the meek. I thought of my experience in Jerusalem, and love flooded through my whole being for Him who had come to earth and taken upon Himself the burdens of us all. I was overwhelmed to think that He might regard me as a friend. I have never forgotten the tender feelings of that early Sunday morning, which were as pure a witness as I have ever received.

I bear my witness of the Savior of the world. I know that He lives. I know that He was foreordained before the Creation of the world to proclaim liberty to the captives. Of His birth and life I say, “Oh, come, let us adore him.”⁷ ■

From a devotional address, “A Child Is Born,” given at Brigham Young University on December 9, 2008. For the full address, go to speeches.byu.edu.

NOTES

1. *The Messiah*, ed. T. Tertius Noble (1912), vi.
2. See Guide to the Scriptures, “Bethlehem,” scriptures.lds.org.
3. “O God, the Eternal Father,” *Hymns*, no. 175.
4. See Bible Dictionary, “Feasts.”
5. See Russell M. Nelson, “The Peace and Joy of Knowing the Savior Lives,” *Ensign*, Dec. 2011, 19.
6. “Cantique de Noël” (“O Holy Night”), *Recreational Songs* (1949), 143.
7. “Oh, Come, All Ye Faithful,” *Hymns*, no. 202.