

## Postcards from Bethlehem

Back in olden days, we had something called postcards. In those days of yore you would take a road trip to, say, the Grand Canyon, and you would actually look at the Grand Canyon, taking in its breathtaking majesty, instead of spending the whole time looking at it through a five inch screen taking pictures and posting them to Instagram or Facebook. Once you were done taking in the beauty of the canyon, you would then go into a tourist trap known as a gift shop where you would use the bathroom, buy some snacks for the road, some trinkets for the kids that would break within ten minutes of getting back in the car, and a packet of glossy photos printed on cardstock with just enough space to write a little note to grandma or your friend, and for their address and stamp. 4 for a dollar. The pictures on the postcards were always the most iconic and idealistic images associated with wherever it was that you went. That is how you used to brag about where you went on vacation.

This morning we're going to take a road trip. Well, actually we're going to look at some postcards from a road trip. I want to share with you some postcards from Bethlehem. We're going to look at some of the most iconic images from the birth of Christ— angels, shepherds, baby Jesus, Mary, and I want to share a few things about each of them. We want to look at the iconic image of Christmas and then pause to consider the reality behind the picture.

### Angels

The first postcard picture is the angels. The popular view of angels is something quite different from the biblical reality. You will not find pudgy, baby-faced cherubim in the pages of Scripture. Anne Geddes would not recognize these angels. They don't flit about like butterflies shooting people where the sun don't shine with arrows of love.

The biblical descriptions we do have of angels portray them as awe inspiring creatures, fierce mighty warriors, the elite guard of the throne of heaven itself.

When angels appeared to men as angels, their response was almost always the same: sheer wonder and awe, but that was almost always instantly swallowed in complete terror and dread. Something about angels made sinful people immediately recognize what they as sinful people were, and what they were not. It was if even this small glimpse of heavenly glory made

people aware at the very core of their being that they were completely and wholly deserving of hell, and it was only by the grace and mercy of God that they weren't instantly and justly cast there.

Even when angels appeared as people there was still something very “other” about them, a transcendence that filled people with fear and trembling. Their coming certainly did not bring about the warm fuzzies.

So when an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in Matthew 1 his first words were, “*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid.*” When the angel Gabriel appeared to the priest Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Baptist who would prepare the way for Jesus, Zechariah was, as we are told in verse 12, *startled and gripped with fear*. A few verses later when Gabriel appeared to Mary, again he has to say, “*Do not be afraid.*” These very same words would have to be repeated in the next chapter to the shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night. In all there are no less than 6 appearance of angels associated with the arrival of Jesus on earth.

These appearances are great in their scope and their scale. From the temple in Jerusalem to an obscure Galilean village to the hills outside Bethlehem. From the intimate to the grand, with single angels making personal appearances to audiences of one; to a massive display outside of Bethlehem with thousands upon thousands of angels proclaiming the praise of God. Twice we are even given the angel's name, which is unusual. Usually in scripture we are simply told that it was an angel of the lord.

There is no doubt that God's hand is about to move. Something big is coming. Something unbelievable is about to happen. After 400 years of silence since the end of the O.T., Heaven is silent no more. God is about to intervene in human history in a major way.

### **Baby Jesus**

Our next postcard is baby Jesus lying in a manger. No baby blue. No stuffed animals. No freshly painted walls with a Noah's ark border. No Jenny Lynn baby crib. No mobiles playing lullabies. No onesies, footy sleepers or baby b'gosh jammys. No baby books with black ink footprints. In fact, it was not the kind of birth any parent would plan. Even the worst HMO

would never force an expectant mother into this kind of delivery room, a stable with a feeding trough for a bed. That can't be sterile.

I wonder if Mary and Joseph were ever bothered by these things, or if after their long trip and the crowded inns if they were just thankful for some place, even if it was this place. I wonder if they had prepared a special place in their home back in Nazareth for their new baby, only to discover they would have to travel to Bethlehem. I wonder if Mary ever asked young Jesus after leaving the door open, "We're you born in a barn?" And I wonder if Jesus ever said, "Well, as a matter of fact, I was." I wonder if any of the animals there somehow, someway, knew just who it was with whom they shared a stable?

No, this isn't how any parent would have planned it. Well, almost any parent. You see here's the real kicker. We've heard it so many times that maybe we have forgotten how incredible this really is. This is exactly how God planned it. Our heavenly father laid it all out exactly this way. It all went according to plan.

Why would God send his Son as a baby to go where no earthly parent would want their own baby to be? Well this was no ordinary baby. This was God in the flesh. This was the creator and sustainer of the universe. Those tiny little fingers are on a hand that once flung stars into space and hung them in their places. Those tiny little feet are the feet of him for whom the whole earth is a footstool.

No, this is no ordinary baby, and he has been sent on no ordinary mission. He has been sent to where no person on earth would send their child, so that the people on earth could go where they never could go on their own. He has a purpose far greater and far beyond this little stable in Bethlehem.

### **Shepherds**

Our next picture is of some shepherds tending their flocks by night. As if to emphasize just how far God was reaching by sending His Son to earth as one of us, the announcement of his birth was made only to shepherds. In Rome, at the center of power in the empire, not a word was heard. At the temple in Jerusalem, the center of Jewish religious life, only the aged Simeon and the elderly widow, Anna, had been told by the Holy Spirit about his arrival, and they blessed the infant Jesus on the eighth day when he was presented at the temple. But the

Sanhedrin, the Jewish ruling council, the priests and rabbis, they were completely in the dark. In the crowded Jerusalem streets, in the busy marketplace, not a peep. In the palace of Herod, there were only veiled rumors more than a year later from Magi traveling from the east seeking one born King of the Jews.

The announcement of what was, up to this point in time, the most significant event in human history, was made only to a few shepherds. From a human point of view this was quite puzzling indeed. In the courts, shepherds were denied full legal status. In the temple, denied religious status. In the marketplace, denied economic status. In the culture, denied social status.

But God's economy operates by very different principles. Measurements in heaven don't count the same way as they do on earth. In heaven, you must kneel to climb. In heaven, the lowly are exalted. In heaven, the poor live in luxurious wealth. In heaven, the last are first. In heaven, shepherds are the top of the social ladder. In heaven, my sins are wiped clean. In heaven, your past isn't held against you. In heaven, we get what only Jesus deserves, because on earth Jesus got what we deserved.

### **Mary**

The last picture in our pack of postcards is of Mary. For all of the attention focused on Mary down through the centuries, for all of the songs sung, all the Madonna pictures painted, and all the words penned, the Scriptures tell us very little about her when it comes to Jesus' birth.

One little verse in Luke 2 has long captured my imagination, "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart." What things did she treasure? How did she treasure them? What did she think of when she pondered them?

Other than guessing the only clue we really have comes in Luke 1:46-56. It is a portion of Scripture commonly known as Mary's song. These verses are a record of Mary's words when she visited her cousin, Elizabeth, when they were both expecting, she with Jesus, and Elizabeth with John the Baptist. Here is what Mary said.

Luke 1:46-55

*"My soul glorifies the Lord  
47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,*

*48 for he has been mindful  
of the humble state of his servant.  
From now on all generations will call me blessed,  
49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me-holy is his name.  
50 His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.  
51 He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud  
in their inmost thoughts.  
52 He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.  
53 He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.  
54 He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful  
55 to Abraham and his descendants forever,  
even as he said to our fathers."*

Realize that these words are from a girl at an age when most girls are worrying about what their hair looks like, texting her bff about what some girl posted what her on Instagram, and whether or not to break up with her boyfriend.

In fact, these words are so eloquent in the original language that some Bible critics doubt Mary could have ever said them. They assume that some later, older more educated scribe had to have written these words and added them to the Scriptures. But there is no need to doubt the Bible here. These words are evidence of nothing more than the fact that Mary treasured up all of these things and pondered them in her heart.

### **Born to Die**

The birth of Jesus was indeed good news of great joy for all the people. A Savior had been born. But he wasn't our savior because he had been born. He is our savior because he was born to die. What brought our salvation wasn't his birth, but it was His death and resurrection. That was His purpose in coming. When we consider the baby in a manger we must never forget that.

Those tiny feet, they will become encrusted with dirt as he travels the Judean country side, and everywhere he goes, he will do so without sin. Those little hands will heal sickness and give sight to the blind. Those pursed lips that can only now whimper and cry and search for his mother's breast, will proclaim truth that will amaze and astound. Those fat legs, that back, those supple, round shoulders, and that neck that can't now even support the weight of his own body, will carry the weight of every sin ever committed by every person that will ever live. Every failure, every mistake, every foolish decision, every rebellion, every careless thought,

every hateful word, every wound inflicted, every murder, every rape, every theft, every infidelity. He would bear the weight of every single sin.

He will take upon himself our sin, our guilt, our blame. He will take our punishment. The judgment we deserve. He will volunteer to take it upon himself. He will allow his righteous Father to exact all due judgment and justice toward our evil on Him. On the cross He will become sin for us.

Then with the price of sin paid in full He will offer us a new life, a new hope. He will give us an eternal relationship with Him. A gift may have been given at Christmas, but it was bought and paid for on the cross. And it isn't opened until you receive Jesus as the Lord and Savior of your life.