

"Surprise" Bethlehem

Traveling south from Jerusalem, your natural curiosity makes you wonder just what to expect as you approach the present-day city of Bethlehem, 2,000 years after the fact of the miraculous birth of the Savior of the world, Jesus Christ. I think that I had more anticipation of what to expect to find in Bethlehem than any other site we visited, probably because of the manger scenes that we are all so used to. Of course, I did not expect anyone to know for sure where the first century Inn with the "manger" had been located, but I was very **surprised** at what we did 'find'. What would have been your expectations?

The 'manger' was nothing as I had expected, but, as I think about it, I realize that God has always been full of 'surprises'.

The five mile stretch of road from Jerusalem to Bethlehem is busy with cars, tour buses, and military vehicles, but it was probably full of travelers even back when Joseph and Mary journeyed to Bethlehem to register for the tax census. Bethlehem was a stopover for caravans traveling south from Jerusalem down to Hebron. At this time, there were probably a lot of other descendants of David returning to Bethlehem to register also, so instead of smoky exhausts and honking horns, you can envision dust from the camel caravans and braying donkeys. And instead of the current-day military checkpoints, perhaps there were Roman soldiers checking for the correct identification?

My 'first impression' of Bethlehem was a little 'blurred' when lunch cost \$40+ for three of us, and the honking horns & traffic jams make you feel like you are in New York! But then you come back to reality when you notice the Hebrew signs and the veiled women wearing floor-length dresses with long sleeves, in spite of the warm temperatures.

I was surprised to still find shepherds tending small flocks of sheep out in the fields around Bethlehem very much like David did 3,000 years ago. The shepherds lead their sheep to green pastures and water. They watch out for their safety - probably more from rushing traffic around this area today than wild animals - and the sheep know their shepherd when several flocks get mixed as the shepherds stop to visit.

Bethlehem has a long history with God's people. Rachel, the mother of Joseph and Benjamin, was buried here, (Gen 35:18-19) and this was the home of David's family where he tended sheep in these same fields. (1 Sam 16:1)

The massive Church of the Nativity that is built over the "location" of the birth-place of Jesus is not what you would expect, but the fact that this is the oldest church in Israel, the oldest sections having been built by Constantine in A.D. 325 is pretty impressive. The entry door is only about four feet tall, so you must stoop over and step down into the Greek Orthodox structure. The ground level chapel contains typical ancient mosaics and gold sculptures. Going down narrow steps several levels brings you into a cave with 'rooms' carved out of the light gray colored rock and shallow 'feed-troughs' which the early mangers consisted of. No wood structure with a straw roof, and hay as we have always pictured it. The manger feed-troughs were sometimes carved directly out of the side of a cave, and other times just hollowed in the top of an individual piece of stone that could be 'moved'. Straw or hay used to feed the livestock may have been in the trough, but a sheep skin or other cloth was probably all that was used in which Mary laid her newborn baby.

Surprises - Were you surprised when you first learned that December 25 was probably not the date of Jesus' birth, as it was more likely in the spring when the pastures would have grass for the grazing sheep (Lk 2:8)? Or, that we have no idea how many wise men there were; the number three are usually represented because of the three types of gifts mentioned (Matt 2:1-12)? And that the wise men were not present at the manger, but came to the **house** where Joseph and Mary settled, perhaps 6 months to a year after Jesus' birth (Matt 2:11)?

Think of Mary's surprise when told that she, a very young girl, would be the mother of God's Son! And Joseph's surprise to learn that his wife-to-be, who he had not known sexually, was pregnant!

Imagine King Herod's surprise when told that a 'king' had been born in his province. While others were joyful and excited, Herod felt threatened by the idea of another king.

The shepherds in the field were surprised when confronted by the angels, but their fear quickly changed to joy as they realized that they were witnessing God's Savior - meeting God in an unlikely time and place. For simple men with open hearts and some knowledge of God's prophecies about the coming Messiah, it was a time of surprise, combining fear & disbelief with joy, hope, wonderment & confirmation. Being present at the very time when God came near in a very special way. What do you think would have been your reaction?

Now, how would that reaction compare if Jesus chose to return during your lifetime? Would it be Good News that we would welcome with Joy? (Rev 22:20-21) Or, would it cause fear because we are not prepared to 'meet God'? (2 Thess 1:8) Aren't we all glad that we have the continual cleansing of the blood of Christ? (1 John 1:7)

Were you not 'surprised' when you first learned of the 'Word' becoming 'flesh', and dwelling among men? The same Word that existed even before the world was formed?

(John 1:1 NIV) In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. (vs.14) The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Throughout life, God continues to 'surprise' us -

with blessings coming from struggles and hardships.
 with good deeds from someone you did not expect.
 with the gift of life that we can watch grow & develop with wonderment.
 with the death of a Son on a cross that you & I might live with God.
 with a changed life from someone of the world you had little faith in?
 with _____ ??????

Because it was not what the Jewish leaders were 'looking' for, they were not receptive to the Messiah that God sent. (Rom 10:1-3) Do we often fail to see the doors of opportunity God opens for us because they are not in the form we are expecting? Do we fail to see the potential blessings in serving others?

Keep looking for the surprises God has in our own lives.

(Gen 35:18-19 NIV) As she breathed her last--for she was dying--she named her son Ben-Oni. But his father named him Benjamin. {19} So Rachel died and was buried on the way to Ephrath (that is, Bethlehem).

(1 Sam 16:1 NIV) The LORD said to Samuel, "How long will you mourn for Saul, since I have rejected him as king over Israel? Fill your horn with oil and be on your way; I am sending you to Jesse of Bethlehem. I have chosen one of his sons to be king."

(Micah 5:2 NIV) "But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times."

(Luke 1:26-38 NIV) 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.

(What a tremendous Faith!)

(Luke 2:1-20 NIV) 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. {6} While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, {7} and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. {8} And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night. {9} An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. {10} But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid. I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people. {11} Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord. {12} This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." {13} Suddenly a great company of the heavenly host appeared with the angel, praising God and saying, {14} "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." {15} When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let's go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has happened, which the Lord has told us about." {16} So they hurried off and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. {17} When they had seen him, they spread the word concerning what had been told them about this child, {18} and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds said to them. {19} But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart. {20} The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things they had heard and seen, which were just as they had been told.

(Mat 2:1-12 NIV) 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. {4} When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. {5} "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: {6} "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." {7} Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. {8} He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." {9} After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. {10} When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. {11} On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. {12} And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.