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THE JOURNEY TO BETHLEHEM

In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant.

(Luke 2:1-5)

differences between the two Gospels. We see those differences particularly in the stories surrounding Jesus' birth.

If we were to cut, copy, and paste the Christmas stories from both Gospels side by side, we would find that they agree at many points. They agree that Jesus' parents' names were Joseph and Mary, that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, that Mary was a virgin when she conceived Jesus by the Holy Spirit, and that Jesus ultimately was raised in Nazareth, not Bethlehem.

But you might also be surprised at how much the Christmas stories differ from each other. If we had only Luke's Gospel, we would assume that both Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth; if we only had Matthew's Gospel we might assume they lived in Bethlehem. If we only had Luke's Gospel we would assume that Mary gave birth in a stable; if we only had Matthew's Gospel we would think she gave birth in Joseph's family home. If we only had Luke's Gospel we would think that six weeks after Jesus' birth the Holy Family returned to Nazareth; if we only had Matthew's Gospel we would assume the Holy Family lived as refugees in Egypt for months, perhaps years, before Herod finally died, and that they only moved to Nazareth because Joseph was warned in a dream not to return to Judea. There are many other differences in Matthew and Luke's Nativity accounts.

Some of these differences can easily be harmonized or reconciled with one another, while others are a bit more difficult to fit together.

Before we consider the arduous journey that Joseph and Mary made from Nazareth to Bethlehem just before Jesus' birth, I'd like to show you on a map where various parts of Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the Nativity took place.

A Lesson in Biblical Geography and History

Let's begin by clarifying where and when the various events in this story took place, as this helps us understand the events we remember year after year at Christmas.

Take a look at the map at the beginning of this chapter and notice the proximity of the places mentioned in the Nativity stories: Luke is clear that Mary's hometown is Nazareth, in the Galilee region of the Holy Land. Matthew implies (and many scholars believe Luke does as well) that Joseph's hometown was Bethlehem, seventy miles south of Nazareth as the crow flies and about five miles southwest of Jerusalem. Mary's elder cousin Elizabeth, to whom Mary makes a visit following the Annunciation, lived with her husband Zechariah in the "hill country of Judea" (Luke 1:65 NRSV), and tradition says the place was Ein Karem, a few miles west of Jerusalem and north

of Bethlehem. Thus, Joseph and Elizabeth lived relatively close by. Mary's home was some distance away, across the mountains that divide the Holy Land.

That's the "where" of the story; now for the "when." It can be difficult to harmonize the events described in Matthew's and Luke's accounts of the Nativity story. On the opposite page I offer for your consideration one possible sequence of events from those two accounts.

A Hastily Arranged Wedding

It is not uncommon for me to officiate at weddings where the wife is pregnant or the couple already have children together before getting married. But in biblical times, if a woman was found to be pregnant by her fiancé (frowned upon then but not entirely uncommon) the marriage ceremony was unlikely to be postponed. We learn in Matthew that after Mary told Joseph of her pregnancy, he was visited by an angel as he slept, commanding him to wed Mary. Matthew then tells us: "When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife" (Matthew 1:24).

In modern times, there used to be more shame associated with a wedding where the bride was expecting a child. The custom was that the bride's wedding dress

EVENTS IN THE NATIVITY STORY

Elizabeth, Mary's kin, conceives John the Baptist.

Six months after Elizabeth conceives, Mary learns she will have a child.

Mary immediately travels to Elizabeth's home to tell her she's pregnant.

Mary (with Elizabeth?) travels to Bethlehem to give Joseph the news.

Joseph decides to break off the engagement.

That night, Joseph has a dream in which he is told to wed Mary.

Joseph and Mary formally marry shortly after his dream.

Joseph and Mary settle in Nazareth, Mary's hometown.

In the eighth or ninth month, an imperial census is called.

Joseph and Mary travel back to Bethlehem.

Mary gives birth in the stable using a manger as a crib for Jesus.

Shepherds, beckoned by the angels, arrive to see Jesus.

Joseph and Mary move into the guest room of Joseph's family home.

Eight days after his birth, Jesus is circumcised.

Forty days after his birth, he is presented in the temple.

Forty-one days to eighteen months after Jesus' birth, the magi arrive.

Herod orders the death of the boy children of Bethlehem.

Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt, where they remain until Herod's death.

Joseph and Mary return and settle in Nazareth.

would not be white; wearing a different color was a kind of public sign that the couple had not waited until their wedding night to be intimate. When I was first ordained this was still common practice. Meeting with couples who were expediting their wedding, I would remind them that Mary and Joseph's wedding was expedited because she, too, was expecting when she married.

It is possible that Joseph married Mary in Bethlehem. Typically after a couple married, the woman moved in with her husband, often in a new addition to his parents' home. It is still the case in many communities in the Middle East. I have been in the homes of Palestinian Christians who, after marrying, added another floor onto their parents' home for their own "flat." If Joseph was from Bethlehem, we would expect the couple would live there.

But Luke tells us that they were in Nazareth at the time when Augustus demanded a census be taken. This might tell us that Joseph took Mary to Nazareth after determining that he would not call off the marriage. It is customary today that when the bride and groom are from different hometowns, the wedding takes place in the bride's community, and, if she grew up going to church, in her home church. In the same way we might expect that Joseph and Mary's wedding may have taken place in Nazareth.

Do you think Joseph and Mary sought to explain to their family and friends about the visit of the angels and Mary's supernatural conception? Joseph didn't believe it without an angel appearing to him in a dream. Would others believe it? We know Mary told Elizabeth and Zechariah, her older kin, and they believed her. But I suspect that neither Joseph nor Mary told many others about this. Later in the Gospels, when visiting his hometown Nazareth, Jesus was referred to as Joseph's son. I suspect that since the wedding was expedited, Joseph simply accepted the snickers and whispers behind his back as family and friends alike assumed he'd taken advantage of Mary prior to the wedding.

Following the wedding, rather than returning to Bethlehem, Joseph and Mary remained in Nazareth. Was this Joseph's way of ensuring that Mary was surrounded by friends and family through her pregnancy? We don't know. What we do know, according to Luke, is that the couple were living in Nazareth when the emperor called for a census, just weeks before Mary was to give birth.

The Enrollment/Census

Luke tells us, "In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria." (Luke 2:1-2). At regular

intervals the Roman government conducted a census in various parts of the empire. In ancient Rome it happened every five years. By the time of Augustus the census was only once every fourteen years.* Augustus conducted a census three times during his long reign. One individual was appointed to oversee the entire census, and local people were assigned to go to each village and make the counts.

In the United States, our census aims to get an accurate count of the population and basic demographic data that are used for many purposes. We also have officials who assess taxes on our property, completely unrelated to the census. Finally, the US Congress sets the tax rates and the Internal Revenue Service enforces the tax code, ensuring we pay our income taxes. These three different functions—statistics, property tax assessment, and income tax assessment—were all combined in the Roman census. The Romans wanted to register each person in the empire and ascertain how much property each possessed, in order to determine the taxes to be collected across the empire.

* There are historical challenges with the timing of this census: Quirinius was not governor of Syria until AD 6, while King Herod, ruler of Judea, died in 4 BC. Some have speculated that Quirinius took a census in this region while serving in another role in Syria and did so just before Herod died—hence Luke's mention that this was the "first" census taken while Quirinius held an administrative position in Syria.

Once the Romans obtained an accurate census of a town or village, they would determine how much tax that village would have to pay. Some people in the town would bid on the opportunity to become the tax collector, whose job was to collect from neighbors the amount required by the Romans plus the tax collector's share. Whatever the tax collectors took in beyond the required amount of tax was theirs to keep as salary. (You can begin to see why tax collectors in Jesus' day were so hated.)

The penalties for failure to appear for the census were serious. Senators who violated this requirement were removed from the senate. Men of the equestrian class lost their horses. But for the ordinary subjects of Rome such as Joseph, who were not citizens, the penalty was much more severe: imprisonment, confiscation of property, scourging, or slavery.¹ This is why there was urgency for Joseph to return to his hometown. He had no choice but to go back to Bethlehem and comply.

Typically, only the man needed to appear before the census-taker. Why then did Joseph take the very pregnant Mary on the long journey to Bethlehem if it was not required by Roman law? We can't know for sure, but we do know that the census tended to foster rebellion among the Jews. Acts 5:37 mentions one revolt that

occurred during Jesus' lifetime as a result of a census. And shortly after the birth of Jesus an armed rebellion took place just a few miles from Nazareth, in Sepphoris. The Roman army descended upon the region, killing many and taking others away as slaves.

I believe Joseph took Mary with him to Bethlehem for fear that, in the troubled times of a census, something might happen to her and the child she was carrying if she remained in Nazareth. I think he took Mary to protect her, not wanting her to be out of his sight during a time of potential danger.

But I also see the Spirit's work in nudging Joseph to take Mary with him to Bethlehem. Why would God nudge Joseph to take Mary on this difficult journey just before she gave birth? I believe that God intended that Jesus be born in Bethlehem.

Writing seven hundred years before the birth of Jesus, Micah foretold that a future king of Israel would come from Bethlehem, where King David had been born, and would reign forever:

*As for you, Bethlehem of Ephrathah,
though you are the least significant of
Judah's forces,
one who is to be a ruler in Israel on
my behalf will come out from you.*

*His origin is from remote times, from
ancient days.*

(Micah 5:2)

Joseph and Mary could not know that magi from Persia would be coming to Bethlehem, based upon this text from Micah, looking for a child who was born "king of the Jews." All Joseph knew was that something inside was telling him he needed to take Mary with him as he returned to his hometown to be registered.

It's interesting how God works in our lives. If we pay attention we'll often feel the nudge of the Holy Spirit guiding us, just as I suspect Joseph felt. As we pay attention, listen, and act accordingly, we find ourselves in the midst of something God is doing to accomplish his purposes in our lives. We speak of this as God's providence. Joseph and Mary were undoubtedly upset by the census and the need to travel for nine days to Bethlehem just before Mary would give birth. But God took the emperor's decree for a census, nudged Joseph to take Mary with him to Bethlehem, and caused Jesus' humble birth to take place in Bethlehem, the very place the magi would go to find him.

Over time, I've come to trust in God's providence—that God works even through adverse circumstances, if I

only pay attention. I look back on my own life and see this in large ways and small. Following my parents' divorce, my mother remarried when I was twelve and our family moved. At the time of the divorce, our move seemed to me like the worst thing that could have happened in my life. Now, I don't believe that God willed my parents to divorce, but I do see God working through these circumstances. Many of the most important things in my life happened as a result of the divorce, remarriage, and move. I came to faith; I met my future wife; I heard a call to ordained ministry, all in the years following that move. What at the time was a terribly painful moment led to so many gifts and blessings in my life. I could not see it when I was twelve. But now at fifty-three I count on the fact that God doesn't cause painful things, but he brings good from them and works in and through them, if we're only paying attention.

The Journey

So, Joseph and a very pregnant Mary set out from Nazareth to Bethlehem. There were two routes they could have chosen, which you can see on the map on page 86. Many Jews traveling from Galilee to Judea would travel southeast, to the Jordan River Valley, crossing the Jordan or staying near it, skirting or bypassing Samaria.

This was the more common route, because relations between Jews and Samaritans were not good.*

Another possible route followed an ancient roadway known as the Way of the Patriarchs. This route cut right through the heart of Samaria. It was the shortest route, though it not only included passing through sometimes hostile territory, but also involved traversing the hills and finally the mountains that divide the Holy Land.

We can't know for certain which path Mary and Joseph took, but my guess is that Joseph took the route through the region of the Samaritans. Why this way and not the other? Again, we have to read between the lines. Jesus regularly ministered with Samaritans, passed through Samaria, and made Samaritans the heroes of his parables, singling them out for affirmation as he ministered with the multitudes. I believe it's likely that his heart for the Samaritans, who were often treated poorly by the Jews, came from Joseph, who himself knew what it was like to be treated as "less than." If Joseph did in fact influence Jesus' concern for the Samaritans, then it seems unlikely to me that he would have avoided taking the shorter route through Samaria to Bethlehem.

* It's interesting that the region of Samaria in the first century was roughly the same as the West Bank territories of the Palestinians today. And the relationship between Jews and Samaritans in the first century was not dissimilar to the relationship between Jews and Palestinians today.

Several years ago I retraced the steps of Joseph and Mary on their trip to Bethlehem in another book, *The Journey*. We followed the Way of the Patriarchs. Though we drove most of it, at points I would walk the route just to get a sense of what Joseph and Mary may have seen and experienced. We stopped at ancient springs where travelers drew water while making the journey.

We often picture Mary on a donkey during this seventy-mile trip. Though Scripture doesn't specifically mention a donkey, we can assume that Joseph would have procured a donkey for the pregnant Mary. Many commentators suggest the journey took three days, and that might be true if you simply calculate how many miles one might walk in a day. But this journey likely took much longer. There were hills and mountains to climb. Each day's travel needed to end at a water source for the animals. And Mary was very pregnant. Several years ago a BBC journalist procured a donkey and walked the route. It took him nine days.²

The Journeys We Don't Want to Take

Walking the hills and mountains of the route to Bethlehem, I found myself winded and wondered what the trip might have been like for a young pregnant woman in the eighth or ninth month of her pregnancy.

As it happened, as I was working on this book one of the associate pastors I serve with, Katherine Ebling Frazier, was nine months pregnant. I met with Katherine and her husband, Andy Frazier, also a United Methodist pastor, and asked them to imagine taking this journey. Here are a few of Kathrine's reflections about what Mary may have been feeling on that journey:

- "At this point, pregnancy feels very exhausting. I have body aches and nausea and I can't sleep. There's just a whole lot of buildup in this time. This is an exciting thing. It's unlike anything I've felt before, but it's stressful."
- "Right now I dread riding in a car for longer than thirty minutes. So there's no way Andy would be getting me on a donkey! That's not happening."
- "When you look at all the art that shows Mary on the journey, riding her donkey, she's sitting side-saddle and smiling. I would imagine her weeping and at moments screaming at Joseph. Maybe she's a little moody. I don't quite imagine it would be so delightful as the pictures portray it."
- "I think I'm terrified in a lot of ways. I wonder if Mary felt some of that as well."

From these snippets you can imagine the anxiety Mary and Joseph must have been feeling. This journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem surely was uncomfortable, unpleasant, and frightening. In Mary's time, women died in childbirth with a frequency that led to an average life expectancy of only thirty-five. The trip Joseph and Mary were making was filled with frightening possibilities.

They set out for Bethlehem reminded once more that they were living under Roman occupation. I suspect Mary left in tears, saying goodbye to her family and hometown at the moment she needed them the most. This was a journey that neither Mary nor Joseph wanted to take. It was forced upon them.

The situation that Mary and Joseph faced is emblematic of what often happens in life. At times, all of us find ourselves on journeys we don't want to take. Sometimes, as with Mary and Joseph, the journeys happen because of someone else's decisions or actions (in this case, it was the emperor). The journeys may be painful, and we may find ourselves brokenhearted or deeply discouraged along the way. We might even think that God is punishing us or has abandoned us. But God promises to sustain us, even though we may walk through the darkest valleys. God tells us to turn our burdens over to him, and he can make something beautiful of them.

Throughout Scripture we see journeys that people don't want to take, and much of the Bible is about God using and working through those journeys. There's Noah on his ark, and Abraham and Sarah uprooted in retirement and sent by God to the Promised Land. There's Ruth and Naomi grieving the loss of their husbands, and Daniel thrown into the lions' den.

Most of the really remarkable people I have met, people who are having an impact on the world, have been on journeys they didn't want to take.

Have you ever been forced on a journey you didn't want to take? It may have been your parents' divorce, or your own. Maybe it was an illness or a move or the loss of a job. Maybe it was the death of someone you loved dearly. I'm not suggesting that God caused these things to happen or that they were God's will. They are simply part of life. But God goes with you on these journeys, and God's providence has a way of bringing good and beautiful things from the pain, heartache, and disappointments we face in life. That's what Mary and Joseph discovered.

Did you know that nearly half of Luke's Gospel is devoted to telling the story of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem, where he would be crucified? Where did Jesus learn to walk the journeys he did not want to take,

trusting that God was with him? Perhaps it was from hearing Joseph talk about the difficult journey he and Mary took in faith and about what God brought forth from it. Just as Joseph had known somehow that God was with him, Jesus on his final journey knew somehow that God would redeem his suffering and use it to transform the world.

All of us go on journeys we don't want to take. In the midst of them, if we open ourselves to God, we can see God's hand leading us. When you find yourself on an unplanned and difficult journey, recall these words from the prophet Isaiah, who was writing to encourage the Jewish people during their own difficult journey in exile:

*The LORD is the everlasting God,
the creator of the ends of the earth.*

He doesn't grow tired or weary.

*His understanding is beyond human reach,
giving power to the tired
and reviving the exhausted.*

*Youths will become tired and weary,
young men will certainly stumble;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength;
they will fly up on wings like eagles;*

*they will run and not be tired;
they will walk and not be weary.*

(Isaiah 40:28-31)

I don't know what journeys you've been on that you did not want to take, or what journey you may be on now. I know that God walks with you. I know that God will strengthen you. I know that God redeems life's painful journeys.

Born in a Stable

Finally, Joseph and Mary arrived in Bethlehem. The way we usually imagine the story, upon arriving at the Bethlehem Inn they found that all the rooms were taken. Every AirBnB and VRBO was booked as well. Either a cruel innkeeper refused to care for them, or a compassionate innkeeper allowed Mary and Joseph to bed down among the animals in the barn behind the inn. Here Mary gave birth among the animals.

Now, it's likely that this story is partially right but in many ways wrong. Let's consider a few details. First, as we've learned, Joseph probably was from Bethlehem, so why would he need to stay at an inn? Second, Bethlehem was a small village in the first century, and so it's unlikely there was an inn; Jerusalem was nearby and would have

provided public lodging. Third, people didn't have barns as we think of them. They did, however, frequently build their homes atop naturally occurring caves. When doing so, they often brought their animals into the caves at night or, if not into the caves, into the main common space in the home.

Let's remember precisely what Luke says in his account of Jesus' birth. Like Matthew's account, Luke's is surprisingly sparse.

He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

(Luke 2:5-7)

Notice that there is no mention of an old wooden barn. It doesn't state they arrived just as Mary was going into labor. And nothing is said about an inn or innkeeper. Now, to be fair, the word *inn* does show up in most English translations, but this is largely due to tradition. In these verses, the Greek word *kataluma* is more accurately translated as "guestroom," as we find

it in the Common English Bible. The *kataluma* was the equivalent of a spare bedroom.*

The census would have brought most of Joseph's family to Bethlehem. We have no idea how many siblings and cousins were seeking to use that guestroom, but we can imagine that adding Joseph and Mary to a room already filled with people was not an option. First of all, childbirth made a room ritually "unclean" for a period of time, preventing the rest of the family from staying there if Mary gave birth in this space. Second, Mary would want and need her privacy while giving birth. And third, a midwife would have wanted space for the delivery.

Given these factors, it's likely that putting Mary and Joseph in the stable was an act of compassion; it could well have been another nudge of the Holy Spirit that led the family to clear out the stable so that Mary could have privacy as she gave birth without rendering the rest of the house ritually unclean. The earliest Christian tradition, dating back to the second century, notes that this stable was located in a cave, likely under Joseph's

* In the first century, a common layout in homes owned by working people of moderate means might have included one large bedroom, a common room that served as kitchen and living space, and a guestroom, often a loft or upper room built atop an exterior pen where the animals were kept if there was no cave beneath the home.

home. Christians still visit this cave when they come to Bethlehem, atop which sits the Church of the Nativity, the oldest continuously used church building in the world.

What is intended to be noticed in this story is the humility of the scene. The Savior of the world, the King of kings, the Son of God, was born in a stable where the animals were kept. His crib was a manger, a feeding trough for the animals, where the Bread of Life spent his first night on earth. There is something profound and beautiful in this story. Christians believe that in Jesus, God himself came to us. When God came, he chose to identify with the lowest and humblest of people. Jesus was born in the first-century equivalent of a parking garage or a shelter. I love this story, because it tells us so much about God, and it points to the character of Jesus' entire life—a life of humility and servanthood.

Luke's telling of the story continues the theme of humility with a visit by shepherds who were "keeping watch over their flock by night" (Luke 2:8 NRSV). Shepherds in that day were on the lowest rungs of the socioeconomic ladder. They were not often trusted. They were typically uneducated and poor and were held in low esteem by many. But on the night when Christ was born, who did God send the angels to invite so they

could meet the newborn king? He invited shepherds! And not just any shepherds; he invited the night-shift shepherds, the lowest of the low.

Listen to what the angel announced to the shepherds. It's the same message we offer the world today as we approach Christmas.

The angel said, "Don't be afraid! Look! I bring good news to you—wonderful, joyous news for all people. Your savior is born today in David's city. He is Christ the Lord. This is a sign for you: you will find a newborn baby wrapped snugly and lying in a manger."

(Luke 2:10-12)

Good news. Wonderful, joyous news. *For all people.* Our savior, our deliverer, our King and Lord was born as a child, wrapped snugly and sleeping in a feeding trough for animals. From the start, God was teaching us through his Son and through the guests who came to celebrate the birth. What they saw in the child, if they really understood—and what we still find, if we really understand—is the glory of God revealed, and peace to all who see and understand and trust him. This is Christmas, when God has come near—in humility, as

a child born in the humblest of ways, surrounded by Joseph, Mary, and the night-shift shepherds.

I am United Methodist, but I greatly admire Pope Francis. He is a remarkable figure. When the pope celebrated his eightieth birthday in 2016, he began his day with a special birthday breakfast. To help him celebrate, he invited eight homeless people to join him for the meal. I love that. Pope Francis acted in a way that embodied the character of God. When Christ was born, God invited night-shift shepherds, people who had no roof over their heads when they worked, to celebrate the birth.

Pope Francis offered an example for all Christians. If we overlook the message that God's good news came first to the lowly and the poor, then we have missed Luke's point. As Scripture says, "God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble" (1 Peter 5:5 NRSV). Jesus himself said, "So those who are last will be first. And those who are first will be last... Whoever wants to be great among you will be your servant" (Matthew 20:16; 26).

These Scriptures offer a clear path forward. If we're to follow the Messiah who was born to a humble family in a lowly place, then we must open our eyes to the poor and marginalized. If we're in high school or middle

school or elementary school, we're called to honor and lift up those who are picked on and unpopular. In the workplace we're to stand up for those who have been made to feel small. This is an important theme in Luke's telling of the Christmas story.

I'll end by returning to Joseph. Some of you reading this book are dads. Two of the most remarkable moments in my life were when my daughters, Danielle and Rebecca, were born.

Danielle was born December 22. After the pushing and pain and flurry of activity she was finally here, and after the nurses quickly cleaned her, they stuffed her in a Christmas stocking made by the United Methodist Women of Dallas for all the new babies being delivered at Methodist Hospital that week. Then they handed her to me. To hold that little girl for the first time, my heart was immediately filled with love for her, a love I didn't know could be so deep. I prayed and gave her to God, held her tight, then gave her back to my wife.

Three and a half years later I held our youngest, Rebecca, and once more felt overwhelming love for that beautiful little girl. Now, twenty-seven and thirty years later, I love them even more.

I feel sure that Joseph experienced the same emotions that night in Bethlehem when the midwife handed him



“Saint Joseph with the Infant Jesus” by Guido Reni

the baby Jesus, wrapped snugly. We can see those emotions in artist Guido Reni’s “Saint Joseph with the Infant Jesus,” painted around 1635. Though I believe Joseph was likely a young man rather than an old one as shown here, the tenderness in Joseph’s face as he holds his son captures what I imagine Joseph was feeling that night.

God, how grateful we are that you never leave us or forsake us. Thank you for walking with us on our journeys in life, particularly the ones we don't want to take. Thank you for working through them and bringing good from them. Thank you for the Christmas story—for coming to us in the most humble of ways, and for inviting the night-shift shepherds to be the first to marvel at Christ's birth. Help us to trust in the “wonderful, joyous news for all people.” Christ, I trust in you as my Deliverer, my King, and my Lord. Amen.