



THE THREE COMINGS OF JESUS

WHILE CONSIDERING ONE, WE PREPARE FOR ANOTHER

One way of really enriching our Advent journey is to keep in mind the three comings of Jesus, and how they relate to one another.

Jesus was born into our history - at a fixed point in time in the past. Jesus comes to us now, in a whole variety of ways. Jesus promised that he will come again in glory, at the end of time.

The Incarnation: Jesus has come.

This is not the coming we await. The first coming of Jesus has already happened. Our preparation to celebrate his birth is the occasion for our deeper reflection. On the first level, it is so important that we really let ourselves experience the power of the Incarnation: God is with us. That God became one of us means that "human" is one of the ways God can be. The deeper we contemplate this mystery the more we enter into the grace of "God with us." The more we let ourselves be touched by this mystery, the more we see the connection between Christmas and Easter: all of this is "for me" - for my salvation - to free me from the power of sin and death.

My Life Now: Jesus comes to me.

When we open our hearts and our mouths and plead, "Come, O Lord," we are most directly experiencing our desire for the Lord to come to us and touch us with the grace of salvation - that we might live it with greater freedom and peace. Jesus is present whenever we need him to be present: actually, whenever we turn to him - even with empty hands. Jesus is alive and active in us when we read God's Word and let it into our hearts. Jesus promised to be present with us whenever two or three are gathered together in his name. And, we know Jesus comes to us whenever our sacrifices and our sufferings unite us with his own mission. Advent is a special time to experience our longing for the presence of Jesus with us now - in all the places we need him most.

Our Future: Jesus comes again, in glory.

One of the most transforming graces of Advent is given us as our longing deepens. The more grateful we become for how God saved us in Jesus, the more deeply we enter into the mystery of how Jesus is with us now. The closer we come to experiencing joy at how our Lord, Jesus Christ came into our world, faithful to God and faithful to our life journey in the flesh, the closer we come to experiencing the mystery of salvation in our everyday lives. And, as our longing is filled with the utter fullness of God's gift to us, we begin to long with the ultimate freedom: we long to be with him in God. We live more at home in this world because our God made a home in this world. But the whole story draws us to a complete picture of who we are and where we belong. Then our prayer begins to change, in our hearts and on our lips. We still are singing, "Come, Lord, Jesus!" but our song is transformed into the free and complete song of the lover: "Come, and take me with you."

Now we watch for the day,
hoping that the salvation promised us will be ours
when Christ will come again
in his glory.

MARY AT HER ANNUNCIATION

AS A MODEL FOR GROWING IN THE VIRTUE OF FAITH

BY GERALD M. FAGIN, SJ



Mary at her Annunciation models faith for us. She shows us that faith is more than assent, but is also trust, commitment, obedience, and submission. Mary trusted in God's promises, was obedient to God's word of invitation in her life, surrendered to the mystery before her, and committed herself to be part of God's plan of salvation in Jesus.

At the same time, we can easily romanticize the Gospel scene—Mary is at prayer, an angel appears, and she says a faith-filled yes. The Scripture also tells us that she was deeply troubled and wondered what the angel's greeting meant. Certainly the angel's explanation only left her with more questions and concerns. She did not say yes because she fully understood or had all her questions answered. She said yes in faith and trust. We do Mary a disservice to think she had some infused knowledge that dispelled all her doubts. She was a young woman of extraordinary faith. The "yes" at the Annunciation was not the first "yes" in her life nor would it be the last.

The really significant yeses in our lives also demand a great deal of trust and openness. We cannot know all the implications of them. We respond to the gift of God's call in our lives. We say yes in hope and trust. Like Mary, we say "yes" to something being born in us that must grow and mature and take a shape we cannot predict. We are called to that depth of faith as we contemplate the story of the Annunciation and all the stories of the life of Jesus in the rest of the [Spiritual] Exercises. We are called to trust, obedience, surrender, and commitment in our own lives. We will hear an invitation to share in the work of Jesus and respond and live in faith.

Living in faith demands surrender to the stories of God and Jesus recorded in the Scriptures. Christian faith especially demands that we let the stories of Jesus shape our minds and hearts. Paul Wadell says that to live in faith means that we "appropriate these stories, striving to embody their viewpoints, values, and vision as our own. To assent to the truths of faith portrayed in the Scripture is to allow them to become the interpretative framework for our world."

Wadell feels we need these narratives "to mold and shape us, especially in the attitudes and virtues of Jesus." Ignatian imaginative prayer on the Gospel stories is a powerful way to grow in faith by putting on the heart of Christ. As Jesus trusted, obeyed, surrendered, and committed his life to the Father, we are to respond in the same way. All the contemplations on the Gospels throughout the Exercises foster growth in the virtue of faith that empowers us to trust God and commit ourselves to service.

Excerpt from *Putting on the Heart of Christ: How the Spiritual Exercises Invite Us to a Virtuous Life* by Gerald M. Fagin, SJ.

Does the fact that sheep were being pastured when Jesus was born prove he couldn't have been born on Dec. 25?

St. Luke records that when Jesus was born an angel of the Lord directed a group of shepherds to go find him. Luke introduces this group of shepherds by saying: *And in that region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night [Luke 2:8].*

This has led to a common argument that Jesus couldn't have been born on December 25th. Why? Because it was supposedly too cold for the shepherds to be pasturing their flocks at night in late December.

Is this true? Not on your life.

Shepherds' Fields

Sheep definitely were pastured in the vicinity of Bethlehem. Luke is correct about that. In fact, they are pastured there today.

There are even two fields (one Catholic, one Greek Orthodox) that are known as the "Shepherds' Field," where pilgrims go to commemorate the events that Luke records. Both have shrines today.



Orthodox Shepherd's Field

Neither can be established as the site Luke mentions. (Indeed, the site may have been at another nearby location entirely.)

Now about the argument that it was too cold to be grazing sheep on December 25th. . . .

Too Cold?

You know those fashionable fleece jackets that are really popular that people wear to keep from being too cold? The ones that return between five and six million hits on Google? Yeah those! You know where the stuff those fleece jackets are made of comes from? That's right! Sheep! (And/or goats.)

It turns out that God decided to have sheep grow this amazing stuff called wool. This wool stuff not only makes sheep soft and fun for children to touch at petting zoos, it also keeps them warm—just like it keeps us warm once we shear it off them.

In fact, wool is one of the main reasons that we keep sheep in the first place. Sheep also need us to shear them, because if we don't then their wool will overgrow and make it very difficult for the sheep to go about its normal sheep business.

Here's a picture of a sheep whose wool has been allowed to grow to the point that, when it was finally sheared, it produced enough wool for twenty men's suits . . .



Anybody want to say it was too cold for that sheep to withstand the rigors of a December night in the vicinity of Jerusalem, where the average nightly low for such nights (today) is 43 degrees Fahrenheit?

Of course, average temperature changes over times, but the first century was well after the close of the last Ice Age.

So maybe we want to be a little careful about declaring it "too cold" to keep sheep outdoors in the Jerusalem-Bethlehem area without, y'know, actually checking the facts.

Speaking of which . . . Let's Check the Facts!

Whether or not Jesus was born on December 25th, the claim that sheep were not being grazed at this time of year is false. In fact, sheep are still grazed there at this time of year. In biblical circles, there is a famous letter written in 1967 in which a visiting scholar noted that sheep were, in fact, being pastured in Shepherds' Field on Christmas Eve itself. Biblical chronologer Jack Finegan writes:

William Hendriksen quotes a letter dated Jan. 16, 1967, received from the New Testament scholar Harry Mulder, then teaching in Beirut, in which the latter tells of being in Shepherd Field at Bethlehem on the just-passed Christmas Eve, and says: "Right near us a few flocks of sheep were nestled. Even the lambs were not lacking. . . . It is therefore definitely not impossible that the Lord Jesus was born in December" [Jack Finnegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology* (2nd ed.), no. 569, quoting Hendriksen, *New Testament Commentary: Matthew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 1:182].

So the idea that Jesus couldn't have been born on December 25th because of Luke's reference to the pasturing of sheep on this night is false.

What about the shepherds? Of course, Luke also says the shepherds were out in the fields. Would it have been too cold for them? After all, shepherds are not naturally covered in wool. (Well, not most of them.) But they do tend to have access to wool clothing and wool blankets, and they can lie down together to keep warm (Eccles. 4:11; cf. Eccles. 4:9-12) and build fires (John 18:18), etc.

And, y'know, 43 degrees. So yeah. Not too cold for them, either.

HALFWAY THROUGH ADVENT - HAVE I MISSED IT?

Dear Jesus,

It's halfway through Advent and I'm not sure what happened. I really wanted to make this a reflective and calm season, preparing for your birth and pondering how you came into this world in such a stunningly humble way. But it's so busy and I'm distracted and sometimes even short-tempered with those I love the most. Where are you in THAT?

I am discouraged and wish I could start over. But as I sit here in the rare moment of silence, I contemplate your birth. In a bed of straw, with the smell of manure everywhere. It's a mess in that stable ... and come to think of it, my life is a little messy, too. I suddenly see that it is not just into the mess of the stable but into my mess that you enter the world. You came into a humble place and that humility is often where I live my life - feeling guilty or distracted and wishing I were a better person. But if I stop thinking of myself and focus on you, I realize that there you are, waiting to love me, even though I have so many unfulfilled good intentions about prayer, so many desires of how to change this fleeting Advent season.

I can begin Advent today and make this season deeper by making room in my heart for you. I can take just a moment before I get out of bed in the morning and feel the empty place in my life I so often fill with my busy-ness. It is there I need you the most. Come, Lord Jesus. Come into that dark and lonely spot in my heart. You know what my needs are more than I do. Let me feel your love. If I only carry that thought with me each day, it will prepare me for Christmas.

Thank you, Jesus. It's not too late. You are waiting to enter my life today, where ever I let you in. Help me to open my heart in these remaining days.