

<i>Date Preached</i>	24-Dec-2021	<i>Date Initiated</i>	14-Dec-2021
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Xmas I, All Years

" But Mary treasured all [this] and pondered ... in her heart "



I think it's safe to say that my test-taking days are behind me, but I learned a little bit of trivia the other day that might come in handy if I ever end up back in a classroom: In the test-design world, there are multiple-*choice* tests, in which the student must select the *one* correct answer from among the many choices; and also multiple-*answer* tests, where the student must choose *all* of the correct answers—which could, in some cases, be every one of them.¹ I admit to going down this internet rabbit hole because I was pondering the question "Where was Jesus born?" and got to thinking about how many correct answers there are to this seemingly simple question.

- The most popular—and most poignant—answer might be "in a manger." This is the stuff of both the sweetest carols and the deepest theology: on one hand, the image of a newborn baby, wrapped in swaddling bands, nestled, simply and cozily, in a trough of fresh hay ... and on the other, the paradox of the Creator and Ruler of the Cosmos deigning not only to enter this messy, hapless world, but also choosing to enter it in basest, poorest humility. Perhaps we cannot over-emphasize the power of the Cross, but I think we sometimes *under*-emphasize the profundity of the Manger.
- Perhaps number-two on our countdown of correct answers would be "in Bethlehem." Both politically and economically, Bethlehem was not terribly prominent: not exactly a backwater, but also not anyone's idea of destination, either. But Bethlehem loomed large in the memory of ancient Israel, as the birthplace of its greatest King, David. And also as the expected birthplace of Israel's savior, the Messiah, for the eighth century prophet Micah (5:2) had foretold, "But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, ... from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel." The town of Jesus' birth confirms, if quietly, His royal status.
- A third possible answer to the question of Jesus' birthplace might be "in Judea" or "in the Roman Empire." As we just heard, St Luke is at pains to locate the Nativity in the context of an emperor and a provincial governor and all the red tape of an imperial bureaucracy. And this is more than just scene-setting. For centuries now, Israel had been overrun and oppressed by one foreign power after another: at times, chafing and suffering; at other times, rising up and resisting; but for generations now, a people captive in their own land—their own *promised* land. God chose to come among us within the ambit of the global super-power of the day ... but, tellingly, did so firmly on the side of the oppressed and beleaguered rather than the powerful and privileged.

¹ I hope teachers do students the courtesy of distinguishing between multiple-choice questions and multiple-answer questions!

Yes, these are all fine answers—you get full credit! "A manger" is both specific and arresting. "Bethlehem" speaks both the historical past and the prophetic future. "Judea" carries with it the geopolitics and injustices of the day. But I'd like to suggest one final answer that, I think, is the most important of all—both the sweetest, most gracious essence of Christmas ... and also its deepest, most intimate promise: that Jesus' ultimate birthplace is *in us*.

For all the cruelly powerful and greedily oppressive [*n pl*] whom Jesus came to cast down and put in their rightful place, He chose not Rome ... but a restive, dusty province near the bottom of any ranking one might care to make. For all the historical traditions His birth tracked and all the prophecies it fulfilled, He chose not bustling, urbane Jerusalem ... but the homeliness—and homey-ness—of a town whose name means "house of bread."² For all the cosmic consequences of Jesus' birth, He chose not to blaze into this world in pomp and fanfare ... but in the total dependency of a newborn. Jesus' choices to bypass all the worldly, proud and glorious entries He *could* have made ↓ reveal His birth as—above everything else—direct and personal and intimate. Jesus came to us not as a collective human race or a generic people, but to each one of us, individually: right into your scared, vulnerable, seeking, aching soul. The Infinite infiltrated this world not in a grand, sweeping gesture, but by wrapping a tiny fist around your finger and looking straight into your heart.

** ** *

There is so much to celebrate this night, and we are pulled in so many directions at once: joy, glory and adoration; wonder, awe and thanks. But all of those responses—although completely valid—look *without*: the pageant and miracle that takes place *out there* ... in a manger, in a town, in an empire ... ablaze with stars and studded with angels and shepherds.

What I invite you to ponder, some time this night before sleep comes, is the still, silent sunrise of Jesus, on one of the darkest nights of the year, *within*: within **you**. Unlimited in His options, He chooses *you* ... seeks *your* heart to welcome and receive Him, once again. He seeks your breaths to be His breaths; your thoughts to be His thoughts; your love to be His love. For the only desire God has is for closeness ... God's only longing is for intimacy ... *with you*.

Angels led shepherds to the Baby lying in a manger in Bethlehem of Judea, and alleluia for all that. But the first ... and fullest ... place that the Holy Child pines to be born ... and live forever ... is in you, if your heart will but receive Him.



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington
St Andrew's Parish
Kent, CT*

² *I.e.*, in Hebrew.