

Week 15

We Experience His Birth, for Us

Guide: The Grace of His Birth



Many mothers, on their children's birthdays each year, tell them the details of the day they were born. Year after year, the details are repeated. At this point in our retreat, we will let Jesus show us the details of his birth. We will go beyond the words of the accounts in Matthew and Luke. We will enter more deeply than our imaginative recollection of nativity scenes. This week, we will receive the grace to experience the birth of Jesus and to understand its meaning for us.

Our desire continues. It is important for us to renew it this week. We desire to know who Jesus is much more deeply. In our observing and understanding him, we desire to fall in love with him more completely. With our love for him growing, we grow in our desire to be with him in his mission.

We will let the background of our entire week be filled with the images of his birth. They tell us who he is. As we've experienced before, this is not an intellectual exercise. It's experiential. We need to move among the scenes to know the anxiety of his parents, the poverty of their situation, the simple but extraordinary joy of Jesus' very human birth, the wonder of his being visited by shepherds, and the danger that already surrounded his life.

Ask yourself: This week, can I let every anxiety I am feeling become connected with the anxiety of Mary and Joseph? Can I get in touch through experiences I have this week with Mary's labor and giving birth, struggling to surrender myself to give life to others? Can I come to know *the beds of hay* I am being asked to lie in? And then feel them transformed as I stare at Jesus lying there in that bed of hay? Are there poor or simple or handicapped or struggling people in my life who can remind me why the shepherds were so joyful at his coming?

May Jesus, who entered our lives so humanly and completely, continue to help us to grow in a knowledge and love of him today.

Some Practical Help for Getting Started This Week

Contemplating the birth of Jesus can be a wonderful experience. And doing this in everyday life can be very powerful. Last week's helps included some basic advice for contemplating a Scripture passage in prayer period and in an everyday-life context.

We're all very familiar with the Christmas story, and we have images of the nativity scenes. This week, let's enter more deeply into the story by entering into the reality of the birth of Jesus and what it says about who Jesus is.

Each morning, when you put on your slippers or robe, recall what it is you wish to fill the *background* of your day. In the first few days of the week, let the stage be set. In the middle of the week, witness the birth itself. Later in the week, spend time with Mary, Joseph, the child, and the shepherds. Perhaps over the weekend, review the story through Matthew's eyes and the tyranny of Herod and the visit of the wise men and the flight into Egypt.

If we take time for prayer periods this week, it will be possible to imaginatively enter the scenes.

I could, for example, imagine being a young friend of Mary and Joseph. I could visit them frequently during Mary's pregnancy and delight in watching her sing the psalms to her child, who is listening in the womb. I listen to the faith-filled conversation of Mary and Joseph, and I watch Mary rub her stomach, as if to comfort the child with their faith. I can experience my own joy as Mary invites me to touch her belly and feel the child's developing movements. I can even take the time to tell Mary and Joseph my gratitude for their openness and their "yes." I can tell them how grateful I am for their son and for this privilege to enter into and witness the very beginning of his life. I can tell them anything I want to about my life and what I'm facing today. At this point in the retreat, Mary and Joseph can become great friends for my own life's journey. Perhaps I can be there when the news of the census arrives. How do they deal with their anxiety? Can I capture and remember their *exact* words to each other?

As I accompany them on the journey to Bethlehem for the census, what is that journey like? The roads, the fatigue, the fear, their conversation? Are they handling this differently than I have handled similar challenges or crises? What words of faith is the child hearing along the way from within the womb?

What is it like for them to not be able to find a place to stay? How is the child experiencing the words "No, no room for you here," "No, no welcome for you here"? Can I capture and remember their *exact* words to each other as they go from place to place? And what was it like when they had to settle for the place where the animals stayed? Imagine every detail, with every sense. Did they see the beauty of the place? Did they know how *fitting*, even perfect, it was?

How close can I get to the birth? As close as I'd like. If I've had a baby or seen a birth, I can imagine Mary welcoming my presence. What words do I offer her? As the contractions begin, what words pass between Mary and Joseph? Do they speak to the child in the womb? Can I get close enough to experience the birth and experience its meaning? Can I receive the newborn child in my arms? Warm and covered with blood, lungs screaming, arms outstretched? Can I wrap him in warm clothes and lay him on the bed of hay, in the very place where the animals feed? Can I feel, deep inside, *for me; this is for me*?

In the following days, what do we say to one another? As I imagine the arrival of the shepherds, what is the scene like? When they leave, can I image Mary and Joseph speaking to their son about how he will some day give his life to bringing good news to the poor?

If we let ourselves enter into these scenes this imaginatively, it will be easy to walk around in our busy lives with these images in our consciousness. And then everyday events will take on these powerful elements: anxiety, faith, fear, anticipation, journey, hardship, unexpected roadblocks, lack of acceptance, alternative plans, poverty, simple beauty, beds of hay as places of nourishment, simple

acceptance. And all day long, we can be seeing and recognizing and connecting — carrying on a conversation, remembering words, noting our feelings.

When I go to bed each night, I can express my gratitude for what I was privileged to experience this day. I can offer my words to Jesus to say how much more I wish to be with him in his mission, for I am falling in love with him, because he is letting me see who he really is.

For the Journey: What Do You See?

“All is calm, all is bright.” This week we watch and listen to another scene in the drama of “infinity dwindled to infancy,” as the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins put it. All is not calm and bright as Joseph and Mary make their way to Bethlehem. All is bright but not calm in the inn where there was no room for them. All is not bright in the lowly stable where there was room for them and calm at the end of their long journey.

We are with the man Joseph who cannot do enough for his wife. We watch him fuss, building a warming fire, cleaning the manger. We hear the silent night, the animals eating and restlessly moving around. We hear in the stillness of the night, in the stillness of time, the sounds of the Timeless One taking time for us.

Where are you sitting or standing? Whom do you watch more closely? Are you attracted by a personal quality of these two humans as they marvel at this third human now lying in a place for feeding? Do you want to go outside, or closer? Does Mary say anything to you in word or gesture?

And now the calm is broken by the shepherds’ coming. They have seen brightness, and their calm has been broken by angels singing a song of peace on earth. Are you moved to tell them anything about what you have seen? It is a scene of wonder and pondering. Mary sits there turning these things over in her heart. She had said yes to mystery when she trusted in a promise. She has much of mystery this night. All the questions of “What is this?” and “How come?” rumble in her soul and you might sit next to her and taste your own “yes” and “Let it be done to me.”

Ignatius would have us be as real as we can be in the face of God’s choosing to be as real as he can be for us. We know the story well, but each year, each time we pray, the story becomes more and more our own. This is God telling us who we are and what he thinks of us. The hard part of this contemplation is familiarity. By being calm, on this silent night, our prayer will bring us anew the brightness that the shepherds had heard: Today, a child is born who will bring peace to all the world. Peace to those who enjoy God’s favor. Peace to those of goodwill. Peace, for Ignatius, is for those who will enjoy their good imaginations.

“Round yon virgin, mother and Child” we take our places and maybe we stand back a bit. We pray with the emptiness of our own stables, waiting for the calm and bright to bless us.

In These or Similar Words . . .

Dear Jesus,

I think it’s the smell of the hay that gets to me the most. I see myself standing in the cold outside the stable, watching through a big opening in the wall. There is little light, but somehow I can see everything.

This prayer has been a wonderful journey. This journey has been a wonderful prayer. I watched as Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem. Mary had helped with many childbirths at home, but no women were with her now, and she was a little afraid. She was still getting to know Joseph, but she loved and trusted him. All of the sharing they had done over the past months as they talked about the pregnancy, his confusion, her unwavering faith, his unwavering faith, and his decision to stay with her — all of that had formed a strong bond between them, something much deeper than newlywed love.

Now as I pray with the scene, they are in the manger and all I can smell is the hay, wet and musty from the animals. How could anyone have a baby *here*, in the wet hay with animal droppings everywhere?

What I really want is to go into the barn and help them. Can I? Oh, Jesus, can I let myself pray with my imagination and be unselfconscious enough just to go into the barn? I walk in, and they both seem glad to see me. She is so welcoming and so grateful to have me there. Joseph has been busy clearing a place for her to lie down, and when a big contraction comes, I just hold her hand tightly. But the smell! Jesus, how could you have been born into such a smell! I tried to find some fresh hay to scatter on the floor for Mary, but then suddenly she was giving birth, and no one but me seemed to care about fresh hay.

And then you were born, into the smelly and wet hay, into the strong hands of Joseph. He wiped your face and cleaned out your nose and eyes and when you suddenly began to wail loudly, they both laughed. I laughed quietly too, but I didn't want to be in the way at such an intimate moment, so I tried to stay back. Oh, Jesus, my heart is so full! The birth of any child into this kind of place would be overwhelming. But *you*? It's cold, it smells, and where is a bed? Where is a blanket for you? Joseph has wrapped you tightly in his cloak, but you need more.

Then I realize how very tired Mary and Joseph are after their journey and the joy of this night of your birth. As Mary dozes holding you, she opens her eyes again. Would I hold you while she and Joseph sleep? I can't believe it! I settle quietly into the hay where I won't disturb them, and I hold you in the cloak. I look down at you, smell your baby neck, and nuzzle your cheek as I did with my own babies. I feel such a love for you and what you have done. You are coming into the world like this — in this incredible poverty in a smelly stable. You are doing this to be with us in the poor and smelly parts of our own lives.

Dear Jesus, help me to feel this tininess of you during the week ahead. Help me to sense your helplessness and to recognize my own helplessness and to surrender to it as you have. Help me to be small in this world and to be here for you, as odd as that sounds, as you are so much here to help me.

Scripture Readings

Matthew 1:18–24

Luke 2:1–21

Matthew 2:1–12

Matthew 2:13–23

Psalm 98