

December 24, Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1-20

Our busyness at Christmas hides God's busyness for us—but Luke's Gospel reveals it.

by [Cleophus J. LaRue](#) in the [December 7, 2016](#) issue

At Christmastime, are we too busy to think about Jesus? We simply cannot spare the time to trot out Luke's well-worn birth narrative, recounting for us once again how God breaks into human history to offer a unique son and to promise that this son is the one who can make us whole and complete—the one who can restore our long-lost joy in the simple yet profound things that infuse our lives with meaning. Who has time to think about the Jesus of scripture at Christmastime?

We know all too well this history and his story. This time of year, even passersby who don't know the language and theological claims of our faith can recognize the familiar scenes and signs of our story, from decorated church lawns to over-the-top home displays. We've pretty much seen and heard it all. We've sat through enough reenactments of the crèche in church basements and fellowship halls to skip this year's performance with the flimsiest of excuses—even when our children are in it. We're just too busy getting ready for Christmas to think about Jesus.

What is lost when religious hope is no longer at the center of our holiday celebration? According to Harvey Cox, Christmas becomes a family reunion, Easter a spring style show, and Thanksgiving a time when there is no one to thank. In the midst of our drummed-up joy and quickly fading delight over unwrapped gifts, we sense that something is missing.

Lincoln biographer Ronald White describes this feeling as “the presence of an absence.” We may no longer speak the language of faith into our celebration, yet we know that the celebration is lacking something crucial. All of our busyness cannot wipe out our sense of this abiding presence of an absence; it refuses to go quietly into the night. That absence is none other than the ever-present movement of God on our behalf.

God's busyness for us (*pro nobis*) often gets lost in our busyness for one another. We believe ourselves to be justifiably busy—we have gifts to buy, food to prepare, houses to decorate, guest lists of family and friends to complete. But our year-in and year-out, uninspiring busyness is no match for the purposeful, awe-inspiring busyness of God. In Luke's narrative we see God on the move, acting with purpose and speed to bring us into the fullness of the people God would have us to be.

In the juxtaposition of the John and Jesus birth stories, we see God's movement between earth and the cosmic realm. The neighbors and relatives who rejoice over John's birth are overshadowed by the more universal and expansive cosmic responses to Jesus' birth. God's movement is also shown in the religio-political repercussions of Jesus' birth. The registration of "all the world" asserts Caesar Augustus's sovereignty over that world—but the birth of God's son is made known not to the emperor or even the governor, but instead to peasant shepherds. Jesus' birth shows that God is on the move to dethrone the powerful and lift up the lowly. The census, even in Luke's day, presupposed registration in the place of a person's residence, not their hometown. But God is on the move, and Luke has Mary and Joseph travel from historical Nazareth to messianic Bethlehem.

Ironically, the one who will ascend the throne of David enters the world homeless. Forced to place her baby in a feeding trough, Mary improvises a solution for the cool night by wrapping him in cloths. Throughout the Gospel of Luke, Jesus continues to lack a permanent home. Luke's Jesus, like Luke's God, is constantly on the move.

Even before his birth, as an unborn child Jesus travels from Mary's home in Nazareth to her cousin Elizabeth's home and then back to Nazareth. The shepherds live in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks. The angels appear to them suddenly—movement by the heavenly host! Then with haste, we are told, the shepherds move to go find Mary and Joseph and the child. Through their actions, all involved demonstrate the appropriate response to the movement of the omnipotent God, who is determined to bring a savior into the world.

This season ought to remind us that we are not the only ones who are busy. God is always busy, in the best way, for us. When we push God's movement out of our celebration, we sense that something unacknowledged in the story is nonetheless present in a very real way. The disparate parts of our lives will not make sense until this presence of an absence is brought once again into our rushed and harried lives this time of year. Our movement, however well intended, will make little sense until we learn once again to reenact God's movement with praise and rejoicing.