

Luke 2:1-20  
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### **O Come Ye, O Come Ye to Bethlehemopolis**

Christmas begins with a gathering. There is no embossed invitation or clever Evite, but rather a summons by the empire. Their purpose is to get a count of those who count, those who can pay into the empire's coffers and sustain the empire's work. So, Joseph and Mary load up and head to Bethlehem to be counted. There is no room for them in the inn, or the guest room as our translation reads which means they wind up taking shelter with animals and placing the baby Jesus in a manger. And it is there in a borrowed space where the more significant gathering takes place. The invitation to gather there looks and sounds very different from the empire's summons. This invitation comes from an angel in the starry sky to shepherds in fields tending sheep. We are probably safe to assume that the shepherds are not counted in the empire's census. Caesar feels no need to bother with these ones on the margins, and yet they are the first ones to receive word of the Messiah's birth, a Messiah born to and for them and to and for everyone else, whether they make the empire's list or not. The angels tell them where to find this baby and then they send the shepherds running with a song.

I grew up with an Italian nativity set that my mother placed just so on a table. It has Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus, shepherds, wise men, and an all-too grumpy angel who hangs from a nail in the top of the wooden stable. My brother and I were told repeatedly to look and not touch. Once that set became my family's and our daughter arrived, I gave up on keeping it out of reach thinking we would have to work hard to break it. And I gave up my vision of having the figures arranged just so. Some of my favorite memories are of our now-22-year-old daughter

singing while arranging the figures and adding some of her own, including some Little People, maybe a Barbie, and probably a Polly Pocket or two. She was intent on getting all of them as close to the baby as possible, and everyone was invited.

Billy Renkl is an artist and writer who recently shared a photo of his family's nativity set, which he has named "Bethlehemopolis: The Not So Silent Night." A friend of his built a platform this year to make the scene less crowded, but it is still gloriously and wonderfully packed with characters of all kinds. Renkl explains:

The whole endeavor started with the clay niño, which we bought in Mexico in 1991 on our first trip together, to see an eclipse. Later we found [Mary and Joseph] in a junk store, without a kid. It grew from there. The ballerina was on a cupcake for [my sister] Margaret's birthday when she was a kid; every single player in the 14-piece Portuguese marching band looks like my nephew Tom in high school; the little clay cups came from Frida Kahlo's house museum in Coyacan. All of the little wooden animals (such as the hedgehog) were gifts from [a friend]. One of the three Mariachi bands were a gift from [friends on the faculty] at Auburn. I found the tiny yellow duck (on the stable railing) in my classroom a couple of months ago.<sup>1</sup>

The scene contains hundreds of figures, and it is blessedly beautiful chaos. This gathering is not a matched set by any stretch of the imagination. I'm not sure who among the characters in Renkl's nativity would count by the empire's standards, but the empire doesn't get to determine this guest list. The angel makes it clear in the invitation: The Savior is born for *you*, plural, all y'all

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<sup>1</sup> Billy Renkl's Instagram, [https://www.instagram.com/p/DSpjia6Dn2M/?img\\_index=1](https://www.instagram.com/p/DSpjia6Dn2M/?img_index=1)

to be exact. Every piece of the frenetic scene belongs in that place, just as every single one of us is welcome, too.

I know you know that; or I pray you do, because there are too many voices screaming about who counts and who does not these days, about who matters and who does not, about who is beloved, treasured, and worthy and who is not. I recently heard a new version of “Come All Ye Faithful,” that names all the ones who still believe they are not welcome, even in the chaos of Bethlehemopolis:

O come all ye faithless troubled and defeated	O sing brokenhearted, sing with painful groaning
O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem...	O come ye, o come ye in joy or in grief.
O come all you doubters, cynics, and you skeptics...	O come and surrender, all your ceaseless striving...
O come, with all your grieving	He's with us in our heartache
O come, with all your sorrow	He's with us in the valley
O come, let us adore Him	He's with us in our waiting
He's still Christ the Lord	He is Christ the Lord <sup>2</sup>

The empire has its own ideas about who counts and who does not. God does, as well, and those lists are not and never have been the same. God's angels do not ask the shepherds to prove their worthiness, they do not ask if the shepherds believe the right things or if they believe

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/p/DSWXUw1jCn5/>

anything at all, nor do they ask if the shepherds have the right credentials. God's messengers simply tell the shepherds that a Savior has been born for them and for everyone else, too, and what to look for when they seek him out. In Jesus Christ, God graciously invites those on the margins *and* those in the centers of power, those whose dance cards are full *and* those whose chairs sit empty, those who have had the best year ever *and* those who have barely made it this far, to come and adore this baby, this Savior, Christ the Lord who was born to gather us close and save us, one and all.

Thanks be to God. Amen.