

Jasper



ANTHONY ESOLEN

MAGDALEN COLLEGE
OF THE LIBERAL ARTS

Word of the day:

BETHLEHEM

When Jesus was about to be born, Joseph and Mary had to go on a journey from Galilee in the north, to a place called Bethlehem, south of Jerusalem. That was because the Romans were counting up everyone in the land, to register them for taxes, and so everyone was

required to go to the place where their families had come from. Joseph was a “son of David,” meaning that King David was his ancestor, and so he went to the city of David, the village called Bethlehem. That was why Jesus was



born in Bethlehem and not in Nazareth, where Joseph and Mary were living.

There are a lot of Hebrew places with BETH in them, because BETH means HOUSE. So BETH-EL means HOUSE OF GOD, and BETHPHAGE (say it: beth-FAH-geh) means HOUSE OF FIGS, that is, figs that aren't ripe yet, figs still on the tree. John the Baptist preached at BETHABARA, which means the HOUSE OF THE FORD. That doesn't mean there was a house there. It just means that it was a place where the bed of the Jordan River

was broad and flat, so that you could FORD it with ease: you could cross it without having to swim. So it was a convenient place for John the Baptist. The people could come to him from mainly from the western side of the river, and he could cross over and preach and baptize them, and then retreat to what was mostly desert on the eastern side of the river. BETHSAIDA was

a village on the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee. Its name means HOUSE OF THE HUNT, maybe because there was good fishing there, or because you could hunt for game birds on the shore; nobody knows for certain.

But BETHLEHEM was a really important name. It means HOUSE OF BREAD. That did not mean that you built a house out of loaves, or gingerbread, if you are the witch in the woods, waiting for Hansel and Gretel. It meant that it was a place where you could find much bread, and here I would like to explain something that people in our time don't often have to think about.

When the Europeans first came to north America, they met natives who had to hunt and fish all the time, because otherwise they would

have starved. The Indians did a very little bit of planting, but absolutely nothing on a big scale. There were reasons why they couldn't, but the point here is that there were no orchards, no vineyards, and no farms. That meant there was no bread: not in any great measure.

If you are going to have a town or a city, you will need BREAD. Why? It's because people have to eat. There are only two choices. You can eat what you catch or find, shortly after you catch it or find it, or you can eat what you have grown and what you have stored away for a long time. But most food will rot very quickly if you don't eat it. The big exception is grain: it is dry and hard, it lasts a long time, and if you can keep it dry and if you can keep the mice away from it, you can store it for years. It's a good rich food, too. If you have a lot of that kind of food, then people don't have to spend all their days hunting rabbits or driving cattle. You can have people who build temples, pave roads, dig canals, write books, map the stars, and all kinds of other things that are not related to food. BREAD makes it possible.

So Jesus was born in BETHLEHEM, the HOUSE OF BREAD. That is a fascinating thing. When he was born, Mary and Joseph didn't have a room indoors, because there were

too many people on the road for the same reason they were. Instead they were given a place to stay in a stable, and Mary wrapped the baby Jesus in tight swaddling clothes to keep him warm. There was no crib, so she laid him in a feeding trough for the cattle there: a place for feed and hay, called a *manger*.

But Jesus was not only born in the HOUSE OF BREAD. We know, because he said it, that he is himself the Bread of Life. He comes to us

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under the appearance of bread when we partake of the sacrament of Holy Communion. The bread we eat that comes from earth is a very fine thing, and it can give us strength for the day, but when we eat it, it is gone, and eventually we

will die, too. But whoever eats of the Bread of Life, says Jesus, will have life in him forever. Then we will see Jesus himself, in the heavenly home that has room for all the saints, where there is no night, no hunger, and no loneliness, but day and fullness and friendship, never to end.



Anthony Esolen is a lecturer, translator, and writer. Among his books are *Out of the Ashes: Rebuilding American Culture*, and *Nostalgia: Going Home in a Homeless World*, and most recently *The Hundredfold: Songs for the Lord*. He is a professor and writer in residence at Magdalen College of the Liberal Arts, in Warner, New Hampshire.

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