

Christmas Eve Sermon
“The Christmas Story Re-Told”
Luke 2:1-20

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This past Sunday, in keeping with the season, I preached on the birth of Jesus according to the Gospel of Matthew. However, if you were expecting to hear a nice feel-good message when you entered the church that morning to help get you through these depressingly covid-filled days, you might have been sorely disappointed for we discovered instead that the news out of Bethlehem was anything BUT happy and uplifting- in fact, we learned it was pretty depressing ITSELF. To start with, Matthew begins his narrative by telling us that the news of Mary’s unexpected pregnancy left her fearful and confused, and had Joseph NOT been warned in a dream, he had already made up his mind he was going to divorce her on the claim she had committed adultery during their betrothal, a claim which if upheld could have allowed Joseph to demand she be stoned to death for her infidelity had he wanted to. And if things didn’t start out positive for the young couple, it only got WORSE! When Herod hears how ANOTHER king has been born in the region, he immediately puts out a hit job on him. He deploys an entire company of soldiers to scour the area and kill every male child under the age of two to ensure that no other monarch could ever dare to try and usurp his throne. Thus, where the birth of one infant—Jesus--would bring joy and hope to ONE couple—Joseph and Mary, it would at the same time lead to the tears and anguish of HUNDREDS OF OTHER YOUNG PARENTS who were now preparing for their OWN CHILD’S funeral instead. Warned once again in a dream to flee Judea, Joseph and family are forced to find sanctuary in Egypt where they remain until they learn that Herod has died and his son has succeeded him. THIS, folks, is the Christmas story as related by the first Gospel writer in our Bibles- an account filled with fear and loneliness, rejection and despair. As I said last Sunday, it’s not exactly the kind of play you’d want your OWN son or daughter to perform in for the annual Christmas pageant, IS it?

Well this evening, we’re once again journeying to Bethlehem to take ANOTHER look at this story, but THIS time we’re investigating it from LUKE’S perspective, a view that will seem in stark contrast to the one Matthew provides. Were you to place both accounts side-by-side, you’d begin to see right away how there are a number of variations between them. For instance, in LUKE’S narrative, Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth and they traveled to Bethlehem for a census while in MATTHEW’S narrative, Joseph and Mary had ALWAYS been living in Bethlehem. In LUKE’S version of the story, the news of Jesus’ birth was first given to Mary by an angel named Gabriel, but in MATTHEW’S version of the story, Joseph got the news first when informed by an UNNAMED angel in a dream that Mary will give birth to a messiah.

The TIMELINE of these two accounts doesn’t match either. According to Luke’s account, Jesus was born AFTER King Herod’s death; Matthew, on the other hand, tells us that Jesus was born DURING the rule of King Herod. According to Luke, Jesus was born in a STABLE as there was no room for him in the inn while as Matthew tells it, Jesus was born in a HOUSE. After the birth, Luke recounts how Joseph, Mary, and Jesus left Bethlehem and went

directly to Jerusalem in order to offer a sacrifice at the temple. Matthew, on the other hand, tells how the Holy Family left Bethlehem and headed to Egypt to protect Jesus from Herod's order to begin slaughtering the children.

However, THAT there are inconsistencies between both accounts is NOT the important thing. What IS important is that Jesus WAS born that night for the purpose of revealing God's love for humankind by saving them from their sins- both authors are in perfect agreement on that. Dr. Sheldon Sorge, the Executive Presbyter of Pittsburgh Presbytery, sent out his Christmas message to all the churches yesterday and in it, he spoke of the importance of "facts," that yes, our faith is built upon an affirmation of a certain set of facts and that APART from them, we'd have none of our treasured Christmas pageants. But he ALSO reminded us that the Bible is MORE concerned about STORIES than sheer facts- "MORE CONCERNED ABOUT ISRAEL'S STORY, JESUS' STORY, GOD'S STORY, YOUR STORY AND MINE." If many of our favorite carols and Christmas traditions were just limited to the facts, that is, devoid of the author's imaginative liberties, they would be slim indeed. No, the stories of the Bible, INCLUDING the Christmas story, are not merely recitations of facts. MORE IMPORTANT than whether every detail in every account is correct and that they all perfectly align up is THE MESSAGE AND SPIRIT of the story, something Sheldon said his mother exploited shamelessly in telling family stories that grew more elaborate and evocative with each telling. What mattered for her was not telling the story like a newspaper reporter would, but telling it so that its humor and power would have maximum impact- IT WAS THE SAME WITH THE GOSPEL WRITERS. The MAIN thing for them was the HEART of the story. And what WAS the "heart of the story" but that GOD IS WITH YOU and GOD IS WITH ME, that right here, right now, God walks beside us to save us from anything that might harm or destroy us. Sheldon concluded his letter to us by stating:

"During the pandemic and beyond, GOD IS WITH US. This is the heart of Christmas. When we exult with joy, GOD IS WITH US. When we stoop in sorrow, GOD IS WITH US. When we prosper, GOD IS WITH US. When we suffer, GOD IS WITH US. THIS is the heart of Christmas."

Biblical scholars agree that the stories of the Bible are more than the mere recitation of facts. Of GREATEST importance is the HEART of the Gospel story which remains "Emmanuel" or "GOD IS WITH US," Emmanuel being the name the angel gave Joseph to call Jesus. Both Gospels were written MANY YEARS AFTER THE FACT and if there ARE discrepancies between the two nativity stories, it is because each of the authors—both Matthew and Luke—is a distinct personality who, under the guidance and inspiration of the Holy Spirit, is writing from his own perspective to emphasize a different aspect of Christ and his message and directing that message to a different audience. MATTHEW was a Jew who as tradition has it was one of the original twelve disciples. He was writing to Christians who had converted from Judaism showing how Christ was their long-expected Jewish Messiah, the fulfillment of Israel's story. LUKE, on the other hand, was a physician who was also a Gentile writing to OTHER Gentiles who had converted to Christianity. He had never met Christ personally but learned everything he knew about him from the other gospel writers.

Over the years, the late Dr. Kenneth Bailey, the son of Presbyterian missionaries, was one

of the world's most respected biblical scholars as well as a leading authority on the Middle East. He has probably done more to help me understand the meaning and significance of this birth narrative better than ANYONE. He retells it from the perspective of a first-century Middle Eastern peasant and it really changes the story QUITE SIGNIFICANTLY. To begin with, we make the assumption that Jesus was born the night Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem. But v. 6 reads, "While they were there her days were fulfilled" which means that Mary was in the final stages of her pregnancy- a period which could have lasted weeks or even as long as a month. Also, Jesus was not born in the middle of the winter. That the shepherds were out in the fields, "keeping watch over their flock by night" indicates Jesus was born sometime in the SUMMER as, in the winter, shepherds always return home in the evenings because of the cold.

Then regarding the wisemen, we have traditionally assumed that there were three of them- because there were three different gifts presented: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But there could have been TEN as easily as there could have been three. And when it says that they came from "the East," again we make the natural assumption that they had sojourned from the "Far East," that is, from the region around Persia. In actuality, a Palestinian would have understood it to refer to ANY LOCALE THAT WAS EAST OF THE JORDAN RIVER, which was not really a great distance from Bethlehem. There are even indications that they may have come from Arabia in the south as Justin Martyr, one of the early Church Fathers, asserts in one of his writings- the earliest post-biblical note on the Christmas story: "Mary brought forth the Christ and placed Him in a manger, and there the magi came from Arabia and found him." In addition, the gifts they present seem to SUGGEST this as Arabia was a major producer of gold in ancient times, and frankincense and myrrh were produced ONLY in Southern Arabia and nowhere else. Yet, Arabs were gentiles and therefore considered "dogs" and no-good trash by the Jews. I saw the contempt which many Israelis STILL hold their Palestinian brothers first hand during a trip to the Holy Lands many years ago. Our guide on the tour kept referring to the Palestinians as dogs and pigs, such was his hatred of them. Therefore, the magi, HOWEVER large their number, were probably rich Arabs who would have been despised and looked down upon by the average Jew.

It is also important to understand the social role of the shepherd in early Palestinian life. The rabbis kept a list of prohibited trades which included a list of occupations that no Torah-observing Jew should ever teach to his sons with one of the trades listed being "herdsmen." Where in the Old Testament, the shepherd was often a symbol of the king (as David himself was a shepherd) and even of God himself (as in the 23rd Psalm), by New Testament times it had become a lowly and much despised profession- all shepherds were considered unclean and therefore ostracized.

Thus, according to Dr. Bailey (and there are many who agree with him), the whole account is clearly Palestinian in nature. It is filled with Old Testament references and the Hebraic style of poetry. Even the practice of wrapping a newborn child was a popular Middle Eastern custom. But if it IS a Palestinian story, then some of the traditional assumptions we make about it CONFLICT with some of the cultural practices of that day. To begin with, Luke tells us that Mary has relatives "in the hill country" of Judea, that Mary and Elizabeth are related. This would mean that if there was no room for them at the inn, they could have simply gone to one of the RELATIVES to stay; they CERTAINLY would have been welcome THERE.

Further, when we are told that Joseph is of the “house and lineage of David,” this would have meant that he could have given his genealogy and it would have opened just about any door in his own hometown. When a self-respecting “son of the village” returns to the town of his origins in the Middle East, a royal welcome always awaits him. Bailey feels the refusal of hospitality that we have traditionally ascribed to the inhabitants of Bethlehem has slandered or libeled that town and undeservedly so. “Is the entire village of Bethlehem so hardhearted that no home is open to a woman about to give birth?” he asks.

The scholar now focuses in on the “inn” in the story- that there was no room for the Holy Family there. He makes the point that the Greek word for “inn” is never used here in the text although it is used by Luke elsewhere such as in the parable of the Good Samaritan, where the wounded man is taken to an inn to recuperate- an inn being a commercial establishment that provides shelter for strangers. Rather, the word Luke uses here is actually a “guest room” attached to a private home. According to Bailey’s interpretation, when we are informed that there was no room for them at the inn, it REALLY means there was no room for them in the “guest room.” But then what are we to make of the MANGER?

To understand what a traditional manger is, you have to know something about how Palestinian one-room homes are constructed. In actuality, they are “split-level” homes, that is, 80 percent of the one room consists of a raised upper terrace where the family cooks, eats and lives, with the remaining 20 percent being a lower level--usually about four feet lower than the upper level--reserved for the animals. The two levels are connected by a short set of stairs. Into the lower level the family cow, donkey and a few sheep are brought each night for protection. In the morning, these animals are taken out into a courtyard, the area is cleaned, and the house is ready for the day. Therefore, the animals moved daily in and out of the house. Jesus alludes to this arrangement in Luke 13 when he says, “Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his ass from the manger and lead it away to water it?”

In these traditional Palestinian homes, the mangers are built into the floor of the raised terrace on which the family lives. If the cow or donkey is hungry in the night, it can stand and reach the feed on the floor of the upper family living space. It is thus critical to the story to understand that the manger is therefore located in the LIVING ROOM of the home, and not in some separate outside shed as is customarily assumed. If this IS the case, and evidence seems to support it, then it changes our traditional interpretation. Keeping in mind that the text is written to a Palestinian reader, he would naturally understand it this way- that upon giving birth to Jesus, Mary wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger--the manger being located in the main family room--and not the guest room because the guest room, which was a separate private quarter located off the family room, was ALREADY taken.

Now let’s summarize here how according to Dr. Bailey the story REALLY plays out. Joseph eventually finds shelter in a simple peasant home. The home has a guest room but it happens to be filled at the time. In the honored tradition of Middle Eastern hospitality, the host cannot turn the couple away but responds to their plight by clearing the one-room family living space for Joseph and Mary to use. Jesus is subsequently born and placed in a depression in the floor (the manger) to keep him from harm. The shepherds are given a double sign- they will find the babe wrapped, as was the custom, and placed in a manger in a simple home just like

their own. They will not have to hunt for the Son of God at the palace of King Herod, as the magi did in their own search for the child, nor at the home of the chief priest or rabbi nor even at the gates of the Great Temple. Rather, he will come into the world gently, safely, and unpretentiously among poor and lowly folk just like themselves. When they show up at the door of that home to worship him, they will not be instructed to come to the backdoor like the rich often treat their servants. Then some time afterwards, the wealthy Arab astrologers arrive to worship the child and offer him their gifts. Therefore, the two groups of representatives who make their way to this lowly Palestinian peasant home are comprised of poor, outcast shepherds and rich and learned, yet despised Arabs. Thus Arabs and Jews, educated and non-educated, wise and foolish, near and far, members of the community and outsiders- all these types can find themselves mirrored in the visitors at the edge of the manger crib!

Well, we've now come to the end of our Christmas Eve sermon with the MOST IMPORTANT question of all STILL left unanswered: If the gospels give us at least two different interpretations of the same story that seem utterly contradictory, which one do we pick as MOST AUTHORITATIVE, the one version we KNOW we can trust and follow? In MATTHEW'S account, we saw Jesus entering a world filled with intrigue and tragedy from the moment he was born. Even BEFORE his birth, God has to warn Joseph in a dream how the baby Mary is currently carrying is from the Holy Spirit- just as Joseph was about to divorce and send her away for the sin of adultery. And then AFTERWARDS, we saw how his frantic parents are forced to flee to Egypt for safety from wicked Herod who has been killing young children in order to get rid of a potential rival for his throne. It's a frightening tale of panic and flight, with Jesus pictured here as a refugee.

In LUKE'S retelling of the story, however, we find a kinder, gentler Christmas story with shepherds from the nearby fields attending and expressing wonderment at Jesus' birth and a host of angels suddenly appearing from heaven, singing their praises to the new-born king. It is a joy-filled scene that becomes an even GREATER showcase of love and acceptance when we add Dr. Bailey's Palestinian spin to it. Thus Luke offers us a RADICALLY DIFFERENT account from the scary one we find in Matthew which of course begs the question, "Which one are we to BELIEVE; which one do we embrace as the TRUE nativity story, the one which will define for us once and for all what Christmas is REALLY all about?"

I am convinced the answer is BOTH are true and that they are BOTH essential for a much fuller and more complete understanding of what occurred that first Christmas night over two millennia ago; you can say they represent two-sides of the same coin. You see, as I showed last Sunday, Matthew reveals how there were cosmic forces ALREADY unleashed throughout the world and doing everything within their power to destroy that infant, to keep him from accomplishing his objective for us. Hence, this world hated him before he had drawn his first breath while Jesus LOVED this world and never CEASED loving it, even when we eventually killed him BECAUSE of that love. God was determined that NOTHING would keep him from entering our world and saving us from ourselves- REGARDLESS of all the hatred and rejection we could throw at him. In what OTHER religion can such ardent and inexorable love be found!

Furthermore, it becomes our proof that Jesus was INDEED Emmanuel or "God with us"- the name the angel had given to Joseph in his dream to call him. The scriptures clearly attest

that God DOES understand the pain that lies deep within every human heart because he experienced it HIMSELF- he experienced it when his OWN SON had to endure such pain and suffering on our behalf, not just at the OUTSET of his life when he barely escaped execution from Herod's forces, but even at the END of his life when he died on that cross for us. It is proof that God really DOES love us, that he DOES understand what it is we feel or what we are currently going through whether it is our OWN rejection or fear or loneliness or sorrow; whether it consists of our OWN hunger or thirst, our OWN poverty or persecution. He even understands DEATH ITSELF! In short, GOD UNDERSTANDS US because in every sense of the word he became "GOD WITH US! And because we NOW KNOW that God understands our plight, we are ALSO ASSURED he can COMPLETELY EMPATHIZE with us, confident that if we cast our cares upon him, he promises to provide us with all the resources we need to OVERCOME them and to even THRIVE in the midst of them.

Meanwhile, Luke offers an entirely DIFFERENT interpretation of the nativity story, one from the perspective of a first-century Palestinian to whom the account was originally addressed. The image of the "mean, old innkeeper" disappears along with his inn and is replaced by a gracious, welcoming peasant family. The filthy and drafty stable we've come to associate with Christ's birth now becomes a warm, cozy living room. Jesus, the Son of God, is portrayed as not only come to us in the flesh, that is, as one with our common humanity, but also as one in our simplicity- he is shown being born in a simple peasant home as any other village boy. He abandoned every possible privilege so that he might be able to identify with the poorest and most common among us. Those who eventually make their way to his crib are not kings or generals or chief rabbis but outcast shepherds and despised gentiles like the magi. They thereby discover that this Messiah comes to ALL mankind by welcoming the poor and the marginalized, not the politically powerful or socially well-connected.

And finally, such an interpretation redeems the blackened reputation of the people of Bethlehem. No longer can we look at them as too preoccupied with their own reveling to worry about the critical condition of this young mother-to-be for on the CONTRARY, this scene demonstrates the very ESSENCE of Middle Eastern hospitality. Although the guestroom is ALREADY taken, this poor peasant family refuses to apologize and send them away. Instead, they welcome Mary and Joseph in all the same and make them comfortable in their OWN living quarters. In this way, they were blessed beyond all measure- by becoming the family that welcomed the Son of God into the world. They therefore serve as examples of how WE should live, that Christ calls us to conduct ourselves in the SAME spirit of kindness and humility and generosity that this poor Palestinian family did, and in this way, we may be welcoming Christ, not just into our HOMES, but into our HEARTS and LIVES AS WELL. Let us pray...

Gracious God, you who came to us so many years ago as a lowly babe in a manger, CONTINUE to remind us that you STILL come to us- on Christmas Eve, on Christmas Day, in fact, on EVERY day and that you never STOP coming to us. You come to us, just like that infant-humble, simple and poor. We encounter you in the face of a hungry child, in a homeless man who has no more than the few scraps of clothing on his back, in a young girl whose home is now a battered women's shelter, in a desperate refugee fleeing conditions in his homeland which may spell doom were he to remain there, in a lonely grandmother or grandfather who passes the days in a squalid nursing home, in a friend or loved one who has abandoned all hope while

languishing in a hospital bed. May we never use the excuse that all the rooms are all full and that there is no place for you anywhere- in our community, in our LIVES. Open our hearts and expand our sympathies to reach out and minister in love to such persons in the knowledge that what we do for the least of these our brethren, we no less do to you. May we never be guilty of repeating what happened to your Son born in a manger two thousand years ago. We pray this in the name of that babe, our Lord. Amen and amen.