

GET YOUR STORY STRAIGHT

I have found that one of the most difficult sermons to preach is the story of Jesus' birth. I think, in part, that's because all of us have some preconceived notions about the story. How many times through the years have we been to a Christmas pageant? How many times have we seen parents watching their children play the parts?

Almost all of these pageants portray the story the same way. The scene is illuminated by a shining star. There are the obligatory barnyard animals. There are the angels. There are shepherds. There are the three wise men whom history has named Gaspar, Balthasar, and Melchior with gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. There's Mary, and Joseph, and the Baby Jesus.

Almost all the pageants portray the story that same way. That portrayal leads us to picture the story as happening something like this. Mary and Joseph are two young people in love. They're betrothed to be married. They are traveling together to Bethlehem because Caesar has ordered a census. We probably picture Mary riding into Bethlehem on a donkey. As they enter the city they go to the Inn, and the sorrowful innkeeper tells them that there is no room. But they are welcome to stay in the stable.

The story portrayed in the traditional Christmas pageant is what Biblical Scholar Bart Ehrman calls a conflation. That means there are two or more stories crammed together to make one. The story you heard from Luke tonight is the only direct account of the birth of Jesus. The Gospels of Mark and John don't even mention Jesus' birth. Matthew gives us an account of what comes shortly before and shortly after the birth of Jesus, but doesn't tell us about the birth itself.

As I said, the pageant shows us two stories that have been condensed into one. The three wise men with their three gifts occur in Matthew's account as does the star. The Angels and the shepherds appear in Luke's account, but not in Matthew. In Matthew's account they are in a house; in Luke's account they are in a stable. Nowhere in either story does it say Mary arrived on a Donkey, nor does either story mention an innkeeper. In fact, the Inn itself may not have existed. The word translated as "Inn" can also be translated as "Upper Room".

There's another problem with this story. Accounts of the birth of Kings and other important people were common in antiquity. If you ever have any occasion to read any of those you will find many of the same elements in those stories as you do in the accounts of Matthew and Luke. Dreams, visions, signs in the heavens, portents on earth, and miracles were recorded at the birth of such notable people as Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

It also isn't very unusual for Gods to become incarnate in the Ancient World. If you ever read any Greek Mythology, you will find that many of the Greek gods assumed human form from time to time. So, it's a fair question for any of us to ask, "What makes this story different?"

What makes this story different is the disconnect between the circumstances of this baby and the response of the world. This baby is poor. He is literally born in a barn. Joseph is a poor carpenter, and he didn't conceive this baby- the Holy Spirit did. The mother is a young girl, who could have been outcast or even killed for becoming pregnant as a virgin. The greatest king who ever lived is a nobody as far as the world is concerned. The illegitimate child of a poor stonecutter and a virgin, born amongst animals with only a couple of smelly shepherds and some foreign wise men to witness the event. Well, that and a choir of angels.

If the story occurred today in our community, it might look something like this. Imagine a homeless man and woman arrive in Downtown Huntsville with nowhere to sleep. There are no beds in the shelter, and so they find a place under a bridge. The only witnesses are bums and alley cats. Oh, and a choir of angels, let's not forget them.

That's how Jesus came to us. He occupied a place in society that would cause decent people like you and me to sneer. The truth is we are the poor ones. We are the ones who lack honor. We are the ones who are blinded by our own sin. We are the ones who are in need of redemption. Our best hope, indeed our only hope, is that poor child lying in the manger. We shouldn't be looking down our noses at him. If anything, he should be looking down on us! We're the ones who really need to be saved. He's the one who has cause to sneer. He has cause to look down on us.

However, he doesn't. He loved us enough that he came to us in the weakest form possible to show us that God loves even the least among us. It's a miracle story that we don't need to embellish. The real story of that night so long ago is more than just the story of the birth of a child. It's the story of a God that loved the people of the world beyond measure, and was willing to sacrifice anything to save them. It's the story of a god who came in the weakest form possible just so he could build us up.

Now, for the last two years, if you haven't noticed, the world seems to have gone mad. Our lives have been topsy turvy the last two years. Now, let's take me as an example. Some of you have had worse lives than I have, some better, so we'll just take my life as an example.

The last two years I watched us go into a pandemic, and I watched the world shut down around us. About the same time that that happened, we received notice that our house needed some fifty to sixty thousand dollars-worth of repair work because of water damage. That happened about the same time that the universities shut down and Rachel and Laura had to come home, and so Barbara, Rachel, Laura, Daniel and I were living in a house with no functional kitchen because the entire kitchen had been torn out. Ironically, the leak started from our refrigerator and at one point that was the only working thing in our kitchen- we got that repaired first. When the kids came home, they had to figure out how to do school online, which I never had to do. About that time Barbara's mother became ill, and Barbara had to

uproot her life and go down and stay with her mother. Then her mother had to uproot her life, and come live with me, which is not easy, anybody can tell you.

That's just some of my life- other things happened. As I said, some of you had worse things happen, some of you had better lives, but we have all been tried the last few years. Do you know what that means? It means we get to approach the manger the way those poor shepherds did. I can approach the manger like those shepherds- with nothing! A clean slate for that baby to write on. Doesn't matter who I am. Doesn't matter what I did. Doesn't matter what happened to me. He came to build me up. He loves me despite anything that I may have done. I can have a new life now. So can you.

So, let's get the story straight! The story of the Christ child is more than just the story of his birth. It's a story of our birth into a new life, an eternal life of glory with the risen savior. His birth is our birth. It's our chance to make life new. The angels are singing because he came to save us all. Thanks be to God for that redeeming love of that child that surpasses all understanding.