

“What Do These Stories Mean?”

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Luke 2:1-20

*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*

*<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’*

*<sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,*

*<sup>14</sup>‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’*

*<sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.*

There is an old Dennis the Menace cartoon that shows Dennis and his friend Joey standing outside a department store looking in through a window that has been decorated for Christmas. Dennis says, “Last month was our giving thanks holiday, an’ Christmas is God’s way of saying, ‘You’re welcome.’” It’s a cutesy illustration of what Christmas means, at least to this rascally young boy, but it also raises an interesting question of the chicken and egg variety – which comes first – the thank you or the you’re welcome?

The cartoon would have us believe that we give thanks to God and that God then responds with “you’re welcome” by sending the gift of Christ. This is our typical human pattern and the calendar that we currently use supports this pattern or this interpretation. We pause to give thanks in late November, we then celebrate Christmas in late December, and the year is over. However, I think that if we take a minute to look at things from a slightly different perspective, we might be surprised by what it can show us.

Our standard calendar ends next week on New Years Eve, the New Year will then be marked on January 1<sup>st</sup>. The liturgical or worship calendar that we follow as Christians isn’t ending with our Christmas celebrations, it is only beginning. The season of Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, is the first season of the Christian calendar which then runs through Christ the King Sunday, typically one of the last Sunday’s of November. When we mark our lives with this cycle, Advent and Christmas are the first orders of business in the New Year. God begins with the gift, we don’t have to do anything to deserve it. And through the rest of the year and the rest of our lives we’re recharged with the task of responding to that gift – of giving thanks. God’s gift of love comes to us before we do anything to deserve it. If we can begin to grasp this concept – it has the power to be truly life changing.

A friend of mine forwarded me an article the other day that opened with these striking words, “I’m always killing Jesus.” The title of the article was “Avoiding Easter at Christmas.” The author, Paul Glavic, followed his opening statement (I’m always killing Jesus) by saying this: “I’m always envisioning him as though he’s perpetually on the cross, hardly remembering that, before His death, He just so happened to live a life.

Not just any life, either; the sort of life that purposed to inform the way I would live mine. And even in the moments when I do finally consider Jesus before the cross, I end up looking at Him as a means to an end.”

Too often churches do this very thing with their Christmas celebrations. We jump beyond Christmas, straight through Holy Week and on to Easter, celebrating the gift of salvation as if it is the only gift that comes at Christmas. Too often we take the baby Jesus straight from the manger and nail him to the cross, treating him as nothing more than a gift for the forgiveness of sins – a blood sacrifice. This tendency to focus on Jesus on the cross, to view his life simply as a means to an end, is something I’d like to figure out how to do away with. Sure, the gift of Jesus is about a gift of salvation, but it is about so much more than just that.

The Gospel of Luke from which we read a few minutes ago is one of two places in the Bible that tells the story of Jesus’ birth. The gospel of Matthew also has a version of the story. These stories are similar, but not identical, and people tend to treat these differences in one of two ways. On the one hand we have the tendency to simply lump them together and to tell “the Christmas story.” When we do this there is the potential that we will miss the particularities that these stories are trying to teach us based on the way in which they were written and the audiences to which they were written.

While blending the two Christmas stories together allows us to potentially miss the significance of the differences, this is not my greatest concern. My greatest concern would be our other tendency. Often we begin dissecting the two stories, picking them apart and squabbling over the fact that all of the details don’t match up. When we begin to dissect the stories in this way it often leads to the end that they can’t both possibly be

“true” and we end up, pardon the pun, throwing out the baby Jesus with the bathwater and often rejecting Christianity all together.

It saddens me to see people do this, but people are dismissing the birth stories of Jesus along with other biblical stories at an increasing rate, finding them too unbelievable and simply letting them go. Maybe some of you sitting out there tonight find yourselves in this situation. Maybe the stories about Jesus’ birth and life seem too unbelievable, maybe you feel like there are too many contradictions, and maybe you have rejected the claims of God’s love for us as a result. If this is you – I hope that in some of what I have to say tonight you are able to hear something that at least opens up for you the possibility that these stories might have truth for your life and for our world.

I was particularly excited then this fall when I learned that two of my favorite thinkers, Marcus Borg and JD Crossan, were writing a book together – a book they titled “The First Christmas.” This wonderful book looks at the stories of Jesus’ birth in Matthew and Luke as parables and asks the important question – what do these stories mean.

Borg and Crossan argue that Christmas is about asking ourselves some tough questions. Do we think that peace comes from the military and our government or from the love of God made known in Christ? Do we think that peace comes through violent victory or nonviolent justice? Advent and Christmas, they argue, give us the chance to make choices about how we’re going to live personally and individually, nationally and internationally. Christmas, they argue, is not about mistletoe or even ornaments and presents, but about what means we will use toward the end of a peace from heaven upon our earth.

And so, yes, the Christmas stories in Matthew and in Luke speak to us about the work that God is doing in the lives of humans, but Borg and Crossan argue that there are three primary themes illustrated in the Christmas stories that are related to the issue of salvation, but that are even deeper and more rich than the Easter rush that we so often tend to apply to Christmas. These three themes are light, fulfillment, and joy – and they are not entirely distinct themes, but rather are like three threads, woven together.

The first of these three themes is the theme of light. In Matthew's telling of the story the star of Bethlehem shines in the night sky to guide travelers. In Luke's version the night sky is filled with radiant light, with the glory of the Lord, as angels bring news of birth to the shepherds. The idea of light breaking into and washing away the darkness is central to our celebration tonight.

This experience of light in the darkness is not simply one that we can and will have in our individual lives. Borg and Crossan explain that, "the imagery of light is both personal and political. The contrasts between darkness and light are correlated with other central contrasts: bondage and liberation, exile and return, injustice and justice, violence and peace, falsehood and truth, death and life. These contrasts all have a personal meaning as well as a political meaning. It is important to see both. So it is with the stories of Jesus' birth. They address our personal yearnings and the politics of his world and ours." Tonight we celebrate the birth of one who brings light into the world – light for our lives and light to be shined into all of the places where pain and injustice exist.

The second theme so profoundly illustrated by these Christmas stories is the theme of fulfillment. The people of Jesus' time had been waiting for a Messiah to come and to set the people free from bondage and oppression of the day. "Thus, in their

different ways, Matthew and Luke proclaim that Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise to Israel and of Israel's deepest yearning – for a king like the great king David, for a different kind of life and a different kind of world..."

These feelings are captured in the hymn, O Little Town of Bethlehem when we sing, "The hopes and fears of all the years, are met in thee tonight." The Christmas stories of the Bible combine what we often separate, namely, religion and politics, spirituality and passion for this world. Are these stories religious and spiritual? Yes. Are they also political, about a transformed world? Yes. Tonight we celebrate the birth of one who comes so that our hopes might be fulfilled – hopes for meaning and purpose in our lives and hopes for equality and justice in our world.

Finally, these stories of Christ's birth are stories about great joy. Angel's appear and sing of joy to the shepherds and Mary sings a beautiful song of great joy. Our celebrations today mirror this joy; we gather in a beautifully decorated sanctuary, we have special music with horns and strings, and we sing songs that tell of great joy, "Joy to the World, the lord has come" and "O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant." Tonight we celebrate the birth of one who came and brought great joy; Joy for our tired and downtrodden spirits, joy for the entire world.

And the best news of all this Christmas is this. God has given us these gifts in the baby – light in the midst of darkness, fulfillment in the midst of waiting and hoping, and joy to be celebrated and shared – not because we deserve the gifts, not because we've done anything to acknowledge or ask for or earn these gifts. God has offered us these gifts freely and repeatedly, simply because of God's love for us. And so we have the

choice to make this evening and every day, how (if at all) will we respond to these gifts we're being offered.

So, what do these stories mean? They mean that God has come to dwell among us tonight in the birth of a child. This child can be the light of our lives and the light of all nations. This child is one who can fulfill the hopes and wishes of generations of people who have been anxiously waiting. This child can bring joy for our souls and joy for our communities beyond anything we can imagine. The gifts are offered to you without price. Responding is entirely up to you.