

Reflections on Faith and Life for Advent 2, 2020

“Advent” is a time of preparation, and of waiting for the Lord to come. Christianity in the western world has traditionally celebrated these four weeks by getting ready to welcome Baby Jesus, who will be born in a stable and laid in a manger (a feeding trough). Our nativity scenes (with or without a barn), are usually comprised of a cow, maybe a couple of sheep, three magi (kings, or wise men) on their camels; and some traditions move Joseph and Mary (perhaps seated on a donkey) closer to the “creche” (the nativity scene) each day, until finally, on Christmas Eve, the baby Jesus is laid in the manger. This is the stuff many holiday cards and songs are made of. Sweet memories from our childhood may attend the setting—and there’s nothing wrong with that. But! (So often there’s a “but” in our faith!) That’s not the way it really happened, at least as far as Bible scholars and archeologists understand it. But you can still enjoy it!

Today, the second Sunday in year B in the lectionary (reading) series, we learn that Mark’s gospel (story of the good news of God in Jesus, his Son, our Savior) begins with an adult Jesus already involved in ministry. There’s not birth story at all! (Nor, we’ll see at Easter, is there a real resurrection!) To witness the birth of God-in-the-flesh, we need to look at both Luke (chapter 1-2) and Matthew (chapter 1-2).

Here are the important points we’ve learned (or heard) about the birth of Jesus Christ. The angel Gabriel came to Zechariah, a priest in the Temple, and told him his aged wife Elizabeth would bear a son and he should call him John (Luke 1:1-25). When Elizabeth was in her 6th month of pregnancy, the same angel, Gabriel, came to Mary, a teenager, and told her she would give birth to God’s Son; Mary questioned but said, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:26-38). Then Mary went to visit Elizabeth (her cousin, according to Luke), and when Elizabeth saw Mary, “the babe leaped in her womb” and she praised God, and Mary sang her famous song, the *Magnificat* (“My soul magnifies the Lord”) (Luke 1:39-56). John (the Baptist) was born to Elizabeth and Zechariah, and Zechariah sang his own *Magnificat* (“Praise be to the Lord, the God of Israel) (Luke 1:57-80).

Meanwhile, in another gospel (far, far away!) we meet Joseph, who was pledged to marry Mary—but he found out she was pregnant and didn’t know what to do. Thankfully, the angel Gabriel (who was pretty busy in those days) came to him in a dream and told him not to be afraid, because Mary would give birth to a son, whom they would call Jesus (“Savior”)—and this would fulfill the words of Isaiah, who had prophesied that this child would be called “Emmanuel” (“emmanu” means “with us” and “el” means “God). So Joseph kept his fiancée, and she gave birth to a son, whom they named “Jesus,” or “Savior”) (Matthew 1:18-25).

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Meanwhile, back in Luke's gospel, we find the birth story that's so familiar: Caesar ordered a census, and Mary had to go with Joseph to Bethlehem, the town of his fathers. (There's no mention of a donkey, by the way.) When they arrived, there was no room at the inn; so she gave birth to her firstborn Son and laid him in a manger in the stable that was provided. (No animals are mentioned.) "And there were shepherds abiding in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night," and an angel of the Lord appeared to them (Gabriel again??). The angel said (after telling the shepherds not to be afraid), "Today in the town of David (Bethlehem) a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord, and you'll find him wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." Then there appeared "a great company of the heavenly host" saying (not singing) "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." Then the shepherds hurried off to find Mary and Joseph, and the baby, who was lying in the manger. After seeing the baby, they left to tell everyone what had happened. "But Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart" (Luke 2:1-20).

Meanwhile, back in Matthew, Jesus has already been born and is about two years old. (We know the time frame because when Herod heard there was a new "king," he called together all the chief priests and teachers and asked them where the Messiah was to be born. And when he failed to find the baby in Bethlehem, he ordered the slaughter of "all boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under.") The magi (wise men, kings—and there's no mention of how many there were), came from the east and asked Herod's servants, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and we have come to worship him." (This is the first mention of the star. No stable, no manger, no mention of camels.) The magi gave three gifts: gold (kingly treasure), frankincense (used for incense on the altar of the temple), and myrrh (used for anointing and [get this!] embalming; already as an infant Jesus was being prepared for death) (Matthew 2:1-12).

There you have it, in a nutshell. (Maybe a coconut shell!) That's what our Bibles tell us about the birth of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the anointed of God.

Be blessed this next week of Advent! And treasure the biblical stories in any way you wish! There's not really a "right" way to worship God!