

Christmas: Myths & Meanings

Matthew 1:18-25
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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We have just heard Matthew's version of the story of the birth of Jesus. You may have noticed that it isn't nearly as familiar as Luke's version. Both accounts, by the way, were written some 85-90 years after Jesus' birth. There is no birth narrative in the gospels of Mark or John.

In all actuality, **the differences in these two accounts are quite stunning when one looks closely at each birth narrative separately, instead of combining all the elements of both gospels together, as has been done with traditional Christmas pageants.** Most noticeable, Joseph gets a lot more attention in Matthew than in Luke. For instance, the angel of the Lord speaks to him, not Mary. Therefore, in Matthew, the angel tells Joseph to name the baby, Jesus, while in Luke it is Mary who gets this instruction.

Matthew's story doesn't include a worldwide census being taken that requires Joseph to put his 8-month plus pregnant wife, Mary, on a donkey to make the 94-mile trek, without amenities, from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral hometown, the City of David.

It appears in Matthew that Joseph and Mary had a permanent home in Bethlehem, therefore no need to find an inn for which there was no room, as in Luke. In Matthew, it is only much later that the family moves to Nazareth. This move, we are told, came after spending a few years in Egypt where they fled from King Herod who was killing firstborn male Jewish children – just as Pharaoh had done in the time of Moses – a story not found in Luke.

Matthew's account includes a star that guides the wise men, ancient astrologers, to the place of Jesus' birth. There is no star and wise men in Luke. Another difference, unlike Luke's story, in Matthew there is no angel talking to shepherds who were keeping watch over their flock by night – in fact there is no mention of shepherds at all. And then, if you ever spent the time to compare the genealogies in these two gospels (and I'm not sure why you would), you would notice numerous inconsistencies, including the name of Joseph's father, Jesus' grandfather.

So what are we to make of these two stories that differ so much on the details?

Even though this is something that is explored in our Presbyterian seminaries, **most pastors still don't either have the courage, or don't believe what they are taught, to share the options of understanding with their congregations.** And that's understandable, because most church members put out the fairly clear message: **DON'T MESS WITH CHRISTMAS!**

Well this year, I'm going to mess with Christmas. In a 2004 article entitled "The Meaning of the Christmas Myths," now-retired Episcopal Bishop and member of The Jesus Seminar, John Shelby Spong concludes:

We do both the Bible and human scholarship a grave disservice when we try to literalize and make history out of these interpretive myths, created by the second or third generation of these who were the disciples of Jesus. **No reputable biblical scholar in the world today, Catholic or Protestant, treats these narratives of Matthew and Luke as history. It is time the church said that publicly.**

To which I, and I would suspect many others, respond, "Thanks a lot for tearing down everything I held dear about Christmas. What am I supposed to believe or do now so that Christmas remains an important part of my faith?" Well, Spong has an answer for that as well.

Why do we then keep these stories and repeat them every year if they are not factually true? That is usually the question of an adult who has had his or her fairy tale religion shaken. The answer is simple. **Truth is so much bigger than literalism...** Some human experiences are so large, so real, so life changing and so defining that the words used to describe those moments must break open the imagination if they are to capture this kind of truth.

That is what myth does. That is what the biblical stories of Jesus' birth are all about. There was something present in this Jesus, they said, that opened human lives to new dimensions of reality. Human beings could never have produced what we have experienced in Jesus. In him, they exclaimed, we believe that we have met eternity breaking into time, transcendence entering the mundane, the divine in the life of the human. If that is our experience with the adult Jesus, then his birth must have been marked with heavenly signs that drew people to him.

That is what these stories are trying to say. **Our task is not to master the details or to pretend that myths are history. It is rather to enter the experience that caused the myths surrounding his birth to be born, to be transformed by that life and to become a new creation through that experience.** If that occurs, these early Christians were saying, we too will see the star of Bethlehem, hear angels sing, and like the wise men and shepherds of old, begin our journey toward the mystery and wonder of God. **Bethlehem, the symbolic town where God and human life come together, is finally our human destiny. That is the meaning of Christmas.**

While you ponder all of this in your heart, there is another biblical image that I want to mention that, for me, best represents the meaning of Christmas. It is eloquently presented in the imagery of **light coming into the darkness of the world – a light that overcomes darkness.** In some of the most remarkable poetry ever written, the author of the **Gospel of John** expressively declares:

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world. (John 1:3-5, 9)

This imagery was beautifully captured by the 15th century painter from the Netherlands, Geertgen tot Sint Jans. His painting, entitled *Nativity at Night*, (found on the Internet by our own Rebecca Howard), is portrayed in black and white on the cover of this morning's bulletin. I invite you to take a close look. It's fascinating in that the only light shining out in the darkness, illuminating the face of Mary and the gathered angels, comes not from a candle, but rather directly from the baby Jesus.

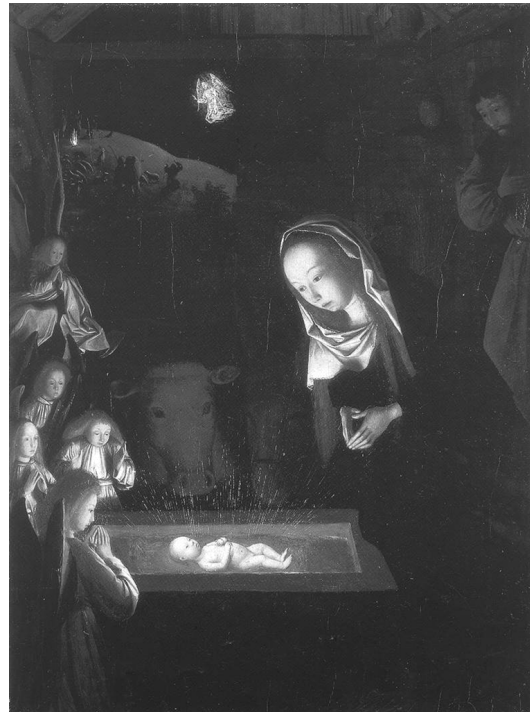
This promised presence of God – Emmanuel, “God with us” – as revealed in and by Jesus, is what we, as Christians, call the Light of the world. But **the Light that has come into the world dwells not only among us, but also within us**. And the good news is that the darkness has not, and cannot, extinguish that Light.

This is important to us individually and also in the understanding of our mission and ministry here at College Hill. Through those of us called to be part of the body of Christ, the Church, **we are to reach out as a beacon of light and hope to others, sharing and reflecting that Light of Christ**.

Perhaps you, or someone you know, or even a complete stranger that you come across this week, is currently experiencing a time of darkness, therefore in need of light and hope this Christmas. If so, **this is my Christmas wish for you this year: a prayer for light to break through the darkness – and in turn, that through you it will be as a ray of light and hope for others**.

This is what the Christmas story reveals: the Light of God was born that first Christmas night, and continues to shine upon us, bringing us hope in the midst of our darkness. And from that hope: faith and joy and peace and love. Let us live in this hope!

Amen.



Nativity at Night - by Geertgen tot Sint Jans, 1484-90
Oil on oak, 34 x 25 cm. National Gallery, London