

Two Birth Stories: Part I
Advent I Reflection
Sunday November 28, 2010
Trinity United Ottawa
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As “Matt & Lucy’s Version Births” showed us, our Gospels offer two such different stories about the birth of Jesus of Nazareth, that for one to be historically factual would make the other seem a lie! Why does everything happen to Mary in Luke, but to Joseph in Matthew? Did they live in Bethlehem or Nazareth? Was there a stable and a star, or not? If you have ever read the first chapters of Matthew and Luke together, you will have been as confused as Matt and Lucy about what events actually surrounded Jesus birth. Christians who cling to their Bible as literal and historical fact surely never dare to view these two texts side by side!

This we know: historians have delved deep and concluded that there was no census in Palestine at the start of 1st Century. No extraordinary star can be found in the astronomical records. Biblical scholars offer persuasive evidence that our treasured stories about Jesus’ extraordinary birth, are actually the literary works of the two Gospel writers. Each wrote in the respected Hebrew tradition of ‘Midrash’, weaving quotations from the Torah into interpretive narratives, to reveal dramatically what Jesus meant to them.

Each birth narrative is the Overture of it’s Gospel. Like a musical overture, it’s a miniature prelude that touches all the major themes of the symphony to come. Matthew, a Jew, wrote his Gospel for the Christian sect within Judaism. He expresses their shared conviction that Jesus was the Messiah, the new Moses, the annointed one so long expected to come and save God’s people. Matthew’s birth story includes five quotes from the Torah, quoted to clothe him in Messianic robes.

Luke, the gentile doctor who travelled with Paul seeding Christian churches around the Mediterranean world, wrote for the wider Gentile populus. He proclaimed Jesus as the saviour of the poor and oppressed of *all* nations, inviting everyone to join the

nascent Jesus movement that was overflowing its Jewish origins, to become Christianity. Do you hear Luke's priority for the poor, in Mary's Magnificat? Her song is adapted from Hannah's song in 1st Samuel. A well known 'hymn' among 1st Century Christians at Worship.

The Christmas story that we sing by our creche, celebrating wholeheartedly with angels and shepherds and wise men and star all together, is a mixture of the Lukan and Matthean birth narratives. It's not Jesus' biography. As grown-up Christians, we need to know this, because the evidence is abundant and clear. Denial of such scholarly facts costs our integrity of faith in this 21st Century, too much.

Now I'm not telling you this to be a meanie or a Grinch! I love the miraculous glow of Christmas as much as you do. I don't want to spoil it! And I promise you, I'm not going to change the words of any Christmas Carols! You see, according to the Midrashic tradition, we have every right and reason to conflate and expand on our ancient scriptures, singing our own story about what Luke and Matthew wrote, as if it were one. Because we have received the meaning of their messages through our tradition, as one story. It is interwoven, deep in our hearts, with our own life stories. Whatever our version of the Christmas story, it is meant to help us conceive genuine hope for our world each year. It is meant to illuminate the Way for the Reign of Peace to be born this year - here! Each Advent, as we renew our own search for the Christ Light coming to life in our life and time, we add new layers of experience, reflection and interpretation to our own Christmas narratives.

That's exactly what Matthew and Luke were doing in the birth narratives. Weaving the sacred writings of the Torah into their life experience. Using ancient words to share new revelations of God's presence with them - as Jesus, their Christ.

Marcus Borg and John Crossan point out in "The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach about Jesus's Birth", that the birth narratives are parables. Matthew and Luke learned from Jesus how to tell a story that leads people to discover a deep new truth. Like Jesus' parables, the birth narratives are challenging, subversive

illustrations, to help people see new possibilities beyond the conventions of their lives. To see life beyond the seemingly unending oppression of the Kingdom of Caesar. To reveal through the light in a newborn's eyes, a vision of God's Kingdom coming. Beneath the shadow of the Pax Romana, Matthew and Luke offered their faith in story form, to help people know and feel and celebrate the Presence of the God of true Peace on Earth, born in humanity - Emmanuel.

What I'm hoping, on this Hope Sunday, is that over the Sundays of Advent, we'll journey toward Bethlehem together via the rocky road of the Judean desert, exploring the birth stories in their historical context. Let's find their meaning then, to discover their meaning for us now. On this journey to the deeper truths in the birth narratives, we can prepare the way for a Christmas morning that is if anything more moving and transcendent, and more inspired with genuine hope for humanity, than ever before.

Will you risk knowing the inspired writings of our Christmas stories side by side, with history and present events?

Trust that they will work their miracle in us anew. I do.

Let's all sing together as Mary, in her Magnificent proclamation of the meaning of her baby's birth: My Soul Cries Out - The Canticle of the Turning. MV #120