

Two Birth Stories ~ Part II Starring Joseph

Advent Reflection on Matthew 1:18-25

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Trinity United Ottawa

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Last Sunday, we enjoyed a little pageant called ‘Matt & Lucy’s Version Births’ that played up the undeniable differences between Matthew’s and Luke’s birth stories for Jesus. We began to see the writers creating these birth stories as parables and as overtures to their unique gospels. I promised we would explore the birth narratives further - to mine them for their meanings, then and now.

Shall we start by setting them in historical context? Borg and Crossan write in ‘The First Christmas:’ “What would you think of a book that started with the opener, ‘I am going to discuss Mahatma Gandhi as a Hindu saint, but I’ll skip all that distracting stuff about British Imperial India? Or another book: ‘I am going to describe Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as a Christian saint, but I’ll get right into his biography and skip all that stuff about racism in America?’”

Luke and Matthew wrote for readers who didn’t need to be told about Roman Imperial oppression, because they were still living under that Empire. But for us to understand Jesus’ birth stories, we really need to know what was happening in that part of the world in the 1st Century, from a historian’s close-up view.

Jesus was born just before the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.E. When Herod died, there were uprisings all over the Jewish homeland, including one led by a man named Judas, at Sepphoris, just an hour and a half’s walk from Nazareth. The 1st Century historian Josephus wrote about how Varus, the Roman governor of Syria, “sent a detachment of his army into the region of Galilee...under the command of his friend Gaius; the latter routed all who opposed him, captured and burnt the city of Sepphoris and reduced its inhabitants to slavery.”

Thousands of Roman soldiers sweeping across the land. Imagine the impact in Nazareth? Males murdered, women raped, children enslaved. Those who survived by going into hiding returned to nothing, because as another writer of the time wrote “The Romans make a desert and call it **peace**.” This is the ‘back story’ of the birth of our ‘Prince of Peace.’

Fast forward eighty-some years, to Matthew writing his Gospel. Jesus has lived his life as a prophet among his Jewish people. He has modelled and proclaimed a vision: a Kingdom of God that supplants the Roman Kingdom, not by warring rebellion, but by building a non-violent, radical, God-centred community. Breaking social and religious rules with charismatic authority, Jesus taught his followers to feed, include and empower the poor, excluded and oppressed. So Jesus gets crucified by Rome, because they fear he is another Judas, about to lead a Jewish uprising. Then, after Jesus’ martyrdom, his Presence is repeatedly experienced by followers in inspiring mystical ways. His martyrdom at the hands of Rome fuels a movement that grows in Palestine and seeds radical Christian communities all over the Mediterranean Roman world.

Matthew and his Jewish Jesus followers have come to see Jesus as their Messiah, the long awaited, God-appointed one who came to save them from the tyranny of Rome. So Matthew likens Jesus to Moses, who long ago saved the Hebrew people from the tyranny of Pharaoh in Egypt. To build this association, Matthew’s birth parable for Jesus borrows plot elements from Exodus 1&2. Moses’ father Amram received the news of his son’s birth in a dream, so Jesus’ father Joseph does too. Pharaoh ordered the massacre of the newborns to kill the child king who might challenge his throne, so King Herod does too. The Exodus came out of Egypt. In our birth story parable, Joseph’s second dream tells him to flee with Mary and the babe to Egypt, from whence Jesus then too, ‘comes out,’ to return to Nazareth.

Borg and Crossan tell us that to Jewish Christians at the end of the 1st Century, our Matthean birth story would have screamed this headline: “Evil Ruler Slaughters

Male Infants. Predestined Child Escapes.” The new Moses lives!

Matthew moves his plot along with five divine dreams of instruction - four of them given to Joseph and one to the Magi. There are also five Old Testament scripture quotations, clothing Jesus in the coat of the Messiah. The most familiar of these is Isaiah 7:14, “The Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child, and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel.” Matthew’s literary device of ‘divine fives’ references Rome’s claim to be the 5th and final Kingdom in history, following the Mesopotamian, Egyptian, Assyrian and Babylonian Empires. He depicts Jesus’ birth as the dawning of the 5th Kingdom, the anticipated final stage of history that would herald peace on earth.

Our Gospel writers wrote to immortalize Jesus’ Kingdom vision. And they did! Inspired by Jesus, Matthew wanted to sustain the new Way to live as God’s people, in a peace-making Kingdom that could transcend even the might of Roman oppression. In line with the norms of that culture, Matthew wove Jesus a personal mythology to contrast and challenge the personal mythology of the Roman Caesar Augustus. Who was known as born of a virgin, Son of a God, King of Kings and Prince of Peace.

Caesar Augustus carried the title of Prince of Peace for his Pax Romana. Peace through victory by the sword. Peace sustained through fear in occupation. Jesus was given the same title by his followers, proclaiming his contrasting way to Peace - through Justice for All: Shalom.

Today is the Peace Sunday of Advent. So what vision of peace might we dream into birth this Christmas? As Canadians, how might we proclaim a counterforce to transcend the Empire of our day? Will we continue on the warrior path in Afghanistan? Or support a ‘Three Cups of Tea’ Way to return Canada to our peace-making role through development and education? There is a movement on the Hill these days that says ‘End it. Don’t extend it.’ Consider, as a Jesus follower,

which way to Kingdom peace we Canadians might nurture, this Christmas.

Will we be pregnant with peace this Advent by supporting the birth of new hope for human rights in Burma-Myanmar, with the recent release of Aung San Suu Kyi. Friday is International Human Rights Day. You could go to the Amnesty website and write a letter. And we can remember that Joseph and pregnant Mary were homeless in our Lukan story. There are young couples like them on the streets here in Ottawa. Sending an email via our Put a Roof on Poverty website is another way to promote justice and peace in our city.

Remembering all the way to Bethlehem, we could help grow the fragile seed of peace in the Middle East, by listening anew, as if we didn't already know, opening our ears to all sides, and to new glimmerings of hope. And we might even journey to the Arctic Inuit community of K.I., where some of us went this week by way of Andree Cazabon's new documentary 'Third World Canada.' Understanding one family's story of our First Nations apartheid legacy, we can help nurture a just peace for all peoples in our own country.

Perhaps we can build our dreams of peace this Christmas by starting with our own relationships in community, as Jesus did. Might we open our hearts to peace in our families, by making that phone call of reconciliation? And could we, you and me, dream Peace on Earth into existence this Christmastime, with our earth-greening actions?

As genuine Jesus followers in this 21st Century, there are as many ways as we have imaginations, to enter into the birth stories of Jesus. Every year we get another chance to celebrate Jesus birth day. To give birth to new possibilities for living into that 5th Kingdom reality that supplants all the Empires: God's Kingdom of Peace through justice for all.

Let us prepare to celebrate the happy birth day of Jesus, by giving up whatever

sword is in our hands. By opening our arms to enfold a tender newborn Prince of Peace. Shalom.

God-given dreams, like Jesus Kingdom vision, still move the plot of history along. So lets sing our Godsent dreams of peace. Dream a Dream MV# 158