

Monday, December 24, 2018

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9.2-7; Titus 2.11-14; Luke 2.1-20

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“I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord” (Lk 2.10-11).

Wait a minute! There’s got to be some mistake! Something just doesn’t add up. The angels are proclaiming the birth of the Messiah. The Son of God. The King of Kings. But instead of being born in Rome, the most powerful city at the time, or even in Jerusalem, the capital of Judea, we are told that Jesus was born in Bethlehem. A small, backwater town. Is this a fitting place for the birth of a King? I think not.

Instead of being born to a queen or even a princess married to a king, this King was born to an unwed teenaged peasant girl. A girl that is engaged to a carpenter, a common laborer. Are these fitting parents for a King? I think not.

Instead of being born in a palace or a royal hospital, this King was born in a barn. A stinky, smelly place hardly fit for animals, let alone fit for a human. Is this a fitting place for the birth of a King? I think not.

Instead of being clothed in fine, silk robes, this King was wrapped in strips of cloth. And probably not all too sanitary at that. Are these fitting clothes for a King? I think not.

Instead of being laid in a bassinette or a comfortable crib, this King was placed in a manger, the feeding trough for animals. Is this a fitting bed for a King? I think not.

Instead of the birth being announced to the powerful and elite of the day, the birth of this King was announced to a bunch of shepherds. To a bunch of smelly herdsmen who were considered among the lowest of the low socially. Is this an appropriate audience to receive such a joyous announcement? I think not.

No, there has to be some mistake. The birth of the Messiah, the Lord, has got to be a much more grand and elegant affair, don’t you think? After all, the birth of this King has been anticipated for centuries. Of this blessed event, the Prophet Isaiah wrote 700 years before:

“For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace” (Is 9.6-7)

There’s been plenty of time to plan out a more appropriate entry for such a magnificent King. There is no way that the one who bears such glorious titles as Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace; the one who is the Messiah, the Lord, the Son of the Living God of Israel, could possibly be born in such humble conditions. There is no way that the

one whose authority would continue to increase, the one who would bring endless peace, would start at the bottom, as opposed to the top, where he could be most effective. How could it have gone so wrong? Particularly when you consider that this was not just the Son of God. No, he was even more. He was, he is, more than the Messiah. He is God incarnate. God in the flesh. As we are told elsewhere in the Gospels, the one born this night was none other than Emmanuel. God with us.

But hey. I suppose if you're God, seeking to come in the flesh to be among your people, you can do anything you want. You can be born in a barn in an out of the way town to an unwed teenage peasant girl. But why? Why not chose a more fitting setting and circumstance for the coming of the God of all Creation?

I think there are two key reasons.

First, he chose the circumstances of his birth precisely because he is Emmanuel—God with us. God WITH us. He did not come to be with the crème de la crème of society. He did not come to be with the elite. He did not come to be with royalty and religious leaders. Not that he didn't come for such as these. But more importantly, he came to be with US. With common everyday folk, like you and me. Born vulnerable and powerless. God specifically came in the flesh to be with all his beloved creation, with all humanity. For only in the flesh would he be able to relate to us, face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh. To live as we do. To experience what we do. To experience the joys that we do. To experience the sorrows that we do. And yes, even to die as we do. So what better way to come among us in a place and under circumstances that reflect some of the most basic of what humanity has to experience, to endure.

What better way for our God to truly experience some of the most nitty-gritty stuff that life has to offer than to be born vulnerable and powerless, as are we all? What better way to grasp the full breadth and depth of what it means to be human? What better foundation for the one who is born the Savior of humanity to most fully understand those he came to save? What humans can and do often experience in life—the range of ups and downs that we can and must endure at one time or another. To meet us where we are and so be able to provide just what we need—hope for something better, the promise of salvation.

Not to mention that, as we see in Scripture, God has a particular preference for those who are in need. With those who are homeless. With those who are widowed and orphaned. With those who are marginalized. So to be born in such humble conditions and circumstances as he did provides the experiences to be able to truly empathize with the least of these.

And the second reason God came in the flesh in the manner that he did, in such vulnerability, in such humble circumstances, is a matter of human psychology. If Jesus had come as an earthly king, born in a palace to a proper queen, we would have to pay him homage out of obligation for his earthly status, out of respect for his high "office." Rather, God wants us to pay him homage, to love and worship him out of desire. To love him because we want to. So in coming in the form of Jesus, as one like we are—common, everyday folk—we are able to more readily view him as one of us, one of our own, even if he is at the same time, also divine.

The benefit of Jesus coming to us as he did, of being Emmanuel—God with us—is that he stands in solidarity with us, and we are able to stand in solidarity with him. So that we can relate to him a little better. And in turn, our homage to him, our love for him, is more authentic. It is out of that love for him that we choose to follow him. As Paul writes to Titus, the result is that we choose “to live lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly, while we wait for the blessed hope and the manifestation of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ” (Titus 2.12-13). This side of the resurrection, we do that by seeking to be his hands and his feet and his heart in the world. To continue with his mission and ministry. To keep him alive in tangible ways through our living of the Gospel. In short, he was born so that he might live in us.

Without a doubt, the birth of Jesus is the most spectacular and the most significant event in human history. His birth, as well as his life, death, and resurrection changed the world in profound ways. The world continues to be changed in profound ways because of us who carry on his mission and ministry.

I’m reminded of a movie that came out in 2004 entitled “A Day Without a Mexican.” It takes place in California, where one-third of our population is Latino. The movie explores what would happen to California’s economy and its social structures if all of a sudden, our Latino population disappeared. The ones who do many of the menial jobs no one else wants to do. Landscaping, housekeeping, janitorial work, farm labor. As well as the significant number of Latinos who are teachers and police officers and doctors and nurses, and any number of other professionals. I started thinking, what would it be like to live in a world without Jesus? How would our culture and our social systems be different? How would we be different? How would our lives be different? More importantly, how would our values be different?

Jesus put into play a whole system of thought and belief that has shaped our society and our world. Without him, we would have a different set of beliefs. A different outlook on life. As Paul notes in our reading from Titus, God being with us in the form of Jesus Christ serves to create a people who are redeemed, purified, and dedicated to a life of good works. God with us, Christ among us, changes our identity, our way of viewing life, our way of living life, and the goals and trajectory we set for our lives. We don’t know what it would have looked like if he had not been born. But we can say with some degree of confidence that when it comes to the basic values given by our God, delivered through Jesus, the laws to love God and to love others, you can’t get a much better foundation for our lives and our society.

So maybe, having the Messiah, Emmanuel, God with us, coming into this world, born in a barn in an out of the way backwater town; a child born to an unwed teen mother, who had to wrap her precious child in unclean strips of cloth and put him in a feeding trough, is not so wrong after all. Because if God can come to us in those humble conditions to share in our vulnerability and our weakness; if he loves us so much that he came in human form just to be with us flesh-to-flesh; he’s liable to show up anywhere, anytime, not just at Christmas. That is our hope. That is God’s promise. Because Emmanuel—God with US—is the best gift we could ask for.

Merry Christmas.