

For nearly two thousands years the birth narratives in Matthew and Luke have been an important and provocative part of the Christian story. But the source of that provocation is very different now than it was when they were first written, and that shift has led us modern Christians into something of a misunderstanding of their importance. So this morning I want to talk about that shift in order to recapture that importance. Without understanding why these narratives were originally thought to be so valuable we cannot really appreciate the fullness of the Christmas story, and thus are handicapped when it comes to recognizing the deepest meaning of the Good News of what God has done in Christ.

Now we all know that only Matthew and Luke have birth narratives. Our oldest writer, St. Paul, mentions only that Jesus was “born of a woman, born under the law.” St. John summarizes the birth of Jesus in that famous statement “The word became flesh and dwelt among us.” Mark says nothing at all of the birth of Jesus; his story begins with the baptism by John when Jesus was already an adult. Within those two birth narratives that we have there are broad agreements, but also considerable disagreements as to detail, disagreements that often cannot be reconciled. For example, both Gospels agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but as we read Matthew’s account today it is clear that Jesus was

born there because that is where Joseph and Mary lived. Indeed, the sequel makes it clear that they lived there for at least two years before they fled to Egypt. There is here in Matthew no account of a census requiring people to go to their ancestral homes to be counted, as we read in Luke. No manger, no lowing cattle adorn this scene, simply a mother giving birth to her child in her own home.

But both accounts also agree that Jesus was raised in Nazareth, a town in the north country of Galilee. In Luke the holy family simply returns home in complete safety to raise Jesus, and why shouldn't they? for that is where they lived. But now it is Matthew's turn to be dramatic. So we have the paranoid rage of Herod who seeks to kill all the children two years of age or under. In response to this is a dream warning Joseph to flee to Egypt, and then the return to Palestine only after Herod is dead. But Bethlehem is still not safe, so they go north to Galilee and settle in Nazareth. There are of course other differences between the two narratives. In Luke we have shepherds led to the manger by an Angel, while in Matthew it is Magi, wise men, led to the home by a star.

When we do our annual Christmas pageant we conflate these two stories, taking the basics of Luke's account with the Annunciation to Mary, the manger and the shepherds, and adding the Magi to it from Matthew. It is good that we do this - I like it a lot as a matter of fact - for those details are not in the least important to the truth of what are we celebrating, as long as we understand that the truth we are celebrating, and therefore what is important about these stories,

is not a well researched historical account of the birth of Jesus, but something else entirely.

This of course is where the shift has occurred historically, and therefore is the source of our current problem. Quite often we do think that what is important about these stories is that they tell us exactly how Jesus was born. We are so influenced, often without knowing it, by the rise of science as a way of thinking, and of history as the study of what actually happened, that we forget that the authors of our biblical stories were influenced by neither of those forces in anything like the way we are. Matthew felt free to tell the story the way he did, and Luke, very likely with Matthew's gospel in front of him, felt free to write the story in a very different way because neither of them was concerned with history or science in the modern sense, but rather with a startling proclamation made in the context of a world dominated by Imperial Rome.

Their goal was not to satisfy public curiosity about how Jesus was born. Their goal was much more ambitious; it was to declare to a world completely dominated by the western world's greatest military, economic and social power that God had been made known to us in this Jewish baby born in an impoverished region of the empire. Therefore both these evangelists used the form most understandable to their audience, which was a birth narrative resembling that of the greatest heroes of the world. Just as Alexander the Great was born of a virgin in obscure circumstances, and just as Augustus Cesar was

called the Son of Apollo after his birth, so too was the birth of Jesus accompanied by the same kinds of portents, and the same kinds of miraculous events.

What we have therefore in these gospels is not just a startling claim about a wondrous birth. What we have here are competing claims about just where we find God in this world. That is what is so amazing about these birth narratives, and that is what made them so important and so provocative two thousand years ago. Against the Roman claim that the divine presence is to be found in Cesar, these birth stories claim that God is to be found in an itinerant peasant born to impoverished parents. Against the Roman claim that the power of God is expressed in marching armies these birth stories claim that the power of God is expressed in unconditioned love and complete forgiveness. Against the Roman claim that divine approval is most convincingly demonstrated in victorious legions spreading Roman hegemony these birth narratives claim that divine approval is most clearly seen in an obedient heart transformed by that love and forgiveness.

This is revolutionary stuff, and the ancients appreciated that, and reacted accordingly. None of them would have been surprised at the idea of the virgin birth of the bearer of the divine presence; that sort of thing happened to great people. What surprised and offended them, as demonstrated in the anti-Christian writings of Celsus, was this claim that the virgin was poor. That is what they couldn't believe, that God would grace a poor Jew, rather than a wealthy Roman. They could not believe and would not accept the idea that God

would stoop so low as to be made incarnate in an itinerant Galilean and not the emperor.

Today what interests us and provokes discussion is not this revolutionary claim of where God is to be found, a claim made against the whole weight of empire, but whether or not Mary was a virgin. That shift of interest has distracted us over the centuries, leading us to miss the crucial element of the story. And on this fourth Sunday of Advent about 2,007 years after Jesus was born, I am here to tell you that I am not going to argue with anyone who believes Mary was a virgin when Jesus born. That is part of the historic Christian faith, and no one should ever have to apologize or even explain such a conviction.

But I am also here to tell you that that there is a much more important challenge in our nativity stories than that, a challenge that should be shaking the foundations of our world today no less than it shook the foundations of the Roman Empire. It is the challenge of where you see God in this world. Do you see God in marching armies, military conquest, the glorious trappings of worldly power? Or do you see God in a baby born to impoverished parents, a baby whose whole life will be dedicated to unconditioned love and absolute forgiveness? The question of whether or not Mary was a virgin does not really interest me, but I have staked my faith, my career, my whole understanding of what God and this world is really at heart all about, on that revolutionary claim dramatized in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that God was made known decisively not in Cesar but in Jesus.

My purpose this morning is simply to repeat the challenge Matthew and Luke made in the birth narratives of Jesus and to present it in the form of a question. Where do you see God in this world? Where do you see the righteous will of God most clearly and truly lived out? Do you see that presence and perceive that will in marching armies sweeping across the plains of modern Mesopotamia? Or do you see it in the humble and self effacing love for the whole world made incarnate in the baby whose birth we will celebrate tomorrow night and Tuesday morning? Then and now, and in every era of human history, that question frames the challenge of the Gospels and tells us why these birth narratives we remember every single year are so important.