

The First Christmas According to Matthew, Mark and John
 (Sermon 1 of a Series on The First Christmas)
 Nov 29, 2009 – First Sunday of Advent
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 Ladner United Church 0900 and 1100

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17 So all the generations from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah,* fourteen generations.

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah* took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, 'Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.'²² All this took place to fulfil what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³'Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
 and they shall name him Emmanuel',

which means, 'God is with us.'²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son;* and he named him Jesus.

John 1

1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.² He was in the beginning with God.³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being⁴ in him was life,* and the life was the light of all people.⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

6 There was a man sent from God, whose name was John.⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him.⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.*

10 He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him.¹¹ He came to what was his own,* and his own people did not accept him.¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of

God, ¹³who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, * full of grace and truth. ¹⁵(John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, * who is close to the Father's heart, * who has made him known.

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Christmas...

No other religious holiday that is so widely celebrated outside its originating tradition....by that I mean that large portions of the non Christian world join in some form of celebrating a cultural Christmas.

Contrasted to that...Ramadan is only celebrated by Muslims and Passover by the Jewish people – but the celebration of Christmas crosses many ethnic and religious lines.

Nor is any religious holiday celebrated for such a long period of time – as soon as Halloween is over – commercially culture turns towards Christmas...and I suppose depending on the day or time we become obsessed or possessed by Christmas...

And for two full months – we hear, see and plan for Christmas...

During the Christian time of Advent – the four Sundays before Christmas Eve and Day – the time of preparation – we don't normally read the Christmas Story...and when we read it – it would be on Christmas Eve...

If you happen to travel or to be absent from your church on the Sunday before Christmas and on Christmas Eve and you do not worship in any other church...

You will have had a "Turkey with presents" Christmas – but you may not hear the Christmas story read from the scriptures...

This year – we shall do things a bit differently...

We will spend this week and the next two weeks – The Four Sundays of Advent (minus the pageant Sunday), Christmas Eve and afterwards – up until January 10th 2010 – when the Lectionary serves us up each year the baptism of Jesus by John when Jesus appears

first time as an adult...which is a story found in all four Gospels – on January 3rd – between Christmas and the Baptism we'll read about the coming of the wise men...

and we will use this time to explore the Biblical Christmas Story...

Now – most Christmas pageants – which we all love including me – are bits and pieces put together in one larger narrative of the two accounts of the First Christmas found – Matthew and Luke – a kind of Christmas stew if you like...

Mark – the earliest of the written gospels has no Christmas story (most mainline scholars agree that Mark was written first and that Matthew and Luke – probably had a copy of Mark as one of their sources and that John was written independently of any knowledge or consultation with Matthew, Mark or Luke's written gospel)

John's Gospel – as we heard this morning has those deep delightful passages about the word made flesh, light and darkness...

Paul's letters and the remaining New Testament letters make no significant mention of Jesus' birth...

So we'll explore them – today touching on part of Matthew – the birth narrative, considering John

For the next three Sundays of Advent – considering the longer version of the prelude to the birth in Luke

On Christmas Eve – the birth according to Luke with some of Matthew thrown back in

After Christmas – the coming of the wise men...Herod's scheming...the slaughter of the innocents...

Ending as I said on Jan 10 with what all four of the gospels acknowledge as being the beginning of Jesus' public adult ministry....Jesus and John meeting....and Jesus being baptized by John...

This will give us a unique opportunity to marinate in these stories of the First Christmas...

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We are going to use Advent in a different way – and use more time to bring as Advent invites us – to bring the Christmas story into the present...

To do that – we are going to need three tools (I am both referring to and quoting liberally here a book by John Domenic Crossan and Marcus Borg – The First Christmas)

Tool #1: Understanding the place of the Christmas Stories in the larger Christian narrative...

Culturally the Christmas Stories are considered for many “stand alone” stories – they celebrate them with no other connection to the larger story of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus...

For Christians the Christmas Stories are not stand alone stories nor are they the most important aspect of the story... – they are connected to a larger story and one who’s other bookend...

Is by far the more important and climatic part of the story...

You can have a Christian faith without the birth stories – but not with out the crucifixion and resurrection....

so when that popular song is sung at Christmas that we shall live for ever more because of Christmas Day – its really bad theology – life eternal is secured through the death and resurrection of Jesus – the birth story is put a part of that...

Hence...Mark’s gospel – the earliest – has no reference at all to Christmas but begins with the story of John the Baptist and Jesus...which begs an interesting question – why did Mark not make reference to the birth stories...

- Was it because he knew of them but did not consider them important...
- was it because he did not know about them but somehow Matthew and Luke did
- or was it because they are a creation of Matthew and Luke’s time

But a gospel with out the cross and empty tomb would be a very different story...

Tool #2 – Does hearing the Christmas stories depend upon them being fact, fiction or something else?

We have to look for another way to experience the meaning beyond the recent (post Enlightenment) debate about the Christmas Story’s factuality...

In other words – did it happen exactly as the biblical accounts read factually?

That debate has two camps:

Camp 1 – It could not have happened this way so I won't believe it. Therefore they are nothing but a fanciful fairy tale

Camp 2 – It all had to happen this way so I can believe it. If there was not a virgin birth, a star etc.

Many parts of ancient history are difficult to verify without secondary sources. Ancient's looked at history with a different mindset and framework than we did...

We are indebted to Marcus Borg/Domenic Crossen – The First Christmas for suggesting that there is a third way to understand the profound truth of the Christmas stories for those who wrote them, a way beyond the beyond the way of factual historical – did it happen exactly this way or not

The first is to see the Christmas stories as parables:

Jesus spoke in many parables – Good Samaritan, Prodigal Son,
When we read those stories – we don't ask the question – before I listen to them did they actually happen that way

i.e. was there really a Jewish man who traveled that road on a particular day, got robbed, had to religious leaders pass him by and then have a Samaritan put him on a donkey...

Rather – we hear it as a parable, we move beyond that level of fact and hear profound, deep and life changing truths in that

So it is with the Christmas Stories...as Borg and Crossan would say -

"Beyond factuality they are profoundly true"

The second is to see the Christmas Stories as Overture...

I'd like you to experience this meaning...

(Play Handel's Messiah Overture)

What piece of music is this?

What function does an overture have in a larger piece of music?

Summing up

Synthesis
Metaphor
Symbol

The Birth stories introduce the larger themes of Jesus' life in Matthew, Luke and John.

Tool# 3 – Before we can hear them today, we need to hear them in the context of their particular culture...

All of the world that Jesus was born in – all of the Jewish community in Palestine lived in a relationship to the Roman Empire and was defined by that relationship...we in Canada have never lived in the context of Empire such as the people of Jesus' day did. `

Rome – which until the return of Julius Caesar from his conquests in Gaul was a republic became through a series of violent and bloody civil wars beginning with Julius Caesar against Pompey and ending with his adopted son and grand nephew Octavian's victory over Marc Anthony and Cleopatra – an Empire which exerted complete political, economic, military and ideological power over all of the known world...

With Octavian's victory as Emperor – in the Greco Roman tradition – he proclaimed himself to be a God (human/divine) as a reward for service to the empire and his great victory

Caesar meaning "one who is divine and to be worshipped"

And he adopted such titles as

Lord and Lord of Lords

Son of God

Prince Bringer of Peace

Savior of the World

Redeemer

Liberator...

And so we come to the Jewish people of Jesus' time – descended from Abraham and Sarah – the one God's chosen people – YHWH – brought out of Egypt and the Pharaoh's oppression to freedom in the Promised Land and now once again enslaved...

You should see where this is going...

They have no military power – no one can stand up to the Legions

The economy and its back breaking taxation is enforced by the Legions

And the political power of the Temple and Jewish Elite is collaborating with Rome for its own benefit...

They have only their ideological and theological power/ faith...

In God's promises and in being God's chosen people and in God's always at the right time raising up a Messiah – a new King David – a new Moses...

And in comes Jesus – and the parallels should become obvious...

Mary Pregnant with child goes to Bethlehem and flees to Nazareth – fleeing from a tyrant Herod who is just like that old Pharaoh – ironically they flee to Egypt because Jesus is the new Moses...and from there he will appear to John the Baptist in Nazareth

and to back all that up - in Matthew there are five dreams and five fulfillments of Old Testament scripture and in the Sermon on the Mount – Jesus utters five key teachings and the Jewish Torah – has five books and so Jesus is the New Moses – come from the Mount with the new laws...

and if you took all the titles that Matthew and Luke and Mark and John give to Jesus – he took is the Redeemer, the Liberator, the Lord, the Prince of Peace, the Son of God and on and on...

And so the Birth Narratives are set up to answer the great unanswered questions posed by Hebrew Scriptures – answered differently by Jews and Christians...and with a twist to those who have their preconceptions of who the Messiah will be and how he will act in the world....

When the Messiah comes – how will he change the world – will he destroy it in an Armageddon like battle or will he turn through conversion all of the world to the one God

What will be like?

What method will he use...?

The Roman Emperor – he brings peace to the world through military victory, violence and war...

All of his political, economic and ideological power is sustained by the Roman Legions

The new Emperor Jesus (who is really not knew but is in line with tradition which is important in Semitic societies – he is the new Moses, the new David) and he brings Peace through the restoration of Justice and righteousness, through healing and wholeness...

the God human Roman Emperor uses violence...this new Emperor – Ruler of the World – the God human Jesus the non violent ways of peace – in fact unlike the Roman Emperor amassing power and opportunity for himself at the top of the heap/who is guarded and protected from people by a huge military machine – this God human Emperor walks among the common people and is willing to give even of his life for his Kingdom...

Now any Jew or Gentile convert (and that's another question – what about all the non Jewish people – place for them as well in the chosen people)

Would hear these stories and the cylinders would be firing and making all of these connections and

It would be enough of a teaser to read and plunge into the rest of the story...

Before you can bring Christmas forward you have to understand where it's located...

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To end today....

As we go through secular cultural Christmas –ironies and contradictions abound...

There's amazing ironies in the First Christmas Story and our celebrations of Christmas...

We drawn into Christmas – yet strangely repelled by it

If you looked around last Sunday in church at both services when we did the group sharing – you would have seen

As we shared around the question – what about Christmas is difficult, painful, etc a lot of tears and very quiet conversations and solemn looks?

Our hopes and fears are not met through the celebration only of a cultural Christmas....

If you feel lost today at Christmas – lonely, afraid, wounded, struggling, mixed up...

You are in good company with Mary, Joseph and Jesus...and the power of the story now...

The power of Christmas is not the extraordinariness of the season nor the market driven culture of Christmas...

If anything it's the opposite...

The Roman Emperor – decides he wants to collect more taxes from his already impoverished people to support "Empire"

And the census he orders his public svc to undertake sets in motion circumstances that bring Mary – pregnant and unmarried, Joseph – frightened and scarred on a ninety mile trek to Bethlehem from Nazareth which is also 1400 miles from Rome in which at the moment the time between her contractions is lessening – guests comfortably ensconced in an inn won't give up their bed for her and obviously none of Joseph's distant kin can find a place for them – and a compassionate inn keeper says have your child in the garden shed...

after the birth they flee of all places to Egypt because some homicidal tyrant named Herod enacts what is like a 20th century Rwandan genocide and kills every child under two and probably anyone else who got in the way – rape, plunder and pillage...

Most human life is closer in experience to – Mary, Joseph and Jesus than it are to Rudolph and the various other "stories" of Christmas...

If through this time of Advent – you can hold your life,
The life of your neighbor
The life of the world...

Expectantly and hopefully – and open your heart to let the one who loves you comes in...unconditionally

Understand John's words as he tells the "story" with different images...

In the beginning was Jesus

And Jesus was with God

And Jesus was God's word – God's

Logos

dabar

God's creative word – that held within it all of the mind of God and holds the world together in love

In God's word Jesus was life

God's "chesed" - God's grace and truth...God's unconditional accepting life, giving love

And that light was so strong and powerful and loving and had such potential to heal and change and guide us (like the star over Bethlehem that people followed)

that it tabernacles with us, set up a tent, made a home in our hearts...

it became incarnate and dwelt in our world...

our world of great darkness

and this light love us, guides us, cares for us – and not only us who may see ourselves as God's chosen ones

but this light loves the whole world...it shines amidst our darkness...

Whatever that is – place of our tears, griefs, our longings, our hurts, our fears, our dreams...

It burns in the darkness and the darkness will never ever ever extinguish it

On this you can depend....