



December 6, 2009
Sermon by Rev. Nancy Talbot

Why Celebrate Christmas?
Readings: Matthew 1: 18-25, Luke 1; 1-4; 26-38; 2: 1-7

During the Christmas break of my first year as at theological school, I went back home to Ontario to celebrate Christmas with my family. While I was there I stopped by to visit the parents of a good friend of mine. They were very active Roman Catholics and were keenly interested in what I was learning at seminary.

I can still remember sitting in their living room and my friend's father turning to me and saying "You know, Nancy, I recently heard that there might not actually have been 3 wise men who visited the baby Jesus at his birth. What do you think of that? What are they teaching you about that at school?"

I can remember being caught somewhat off guard by his question and then going on to explain that it's only because there are three gifts described in the story – the gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh – that we think that there must have been one wise man (or magi) for each gift.

Then I turned to my friend's father and asked him a question in return "Does it matter whether there were three wise men or not? Would the story still be true for you if there weren't?"

I could have gone on to ask him if the story would still be true for him if Mary wasn't actually a virgin; or if Jesus wasn't born in a stable; or if shepherds weren't visited by angels on a hillside or if there were no star that the magi followed"

If the story didn't actually happen the way we choose to tell it every year, does that mean that the story doesn't matter? That we shouldn't bother putting up the tree each year -- or laying out the nativity – or singing the carols?

Just what about the story does matter – if it matters at all – and what about it actually might just be true?

Throughout this fall we in this church have been engaged in conversations about what matters to us about our spiritual life – our life of faith. We've been asking ourselves what we believe about God, about the Bible, about heaven and about Jesus.

We've been pushing our edges and digging into our Bibles and study books and really trying to get a handle on what this business of being a Christian is really all about. It's been an exciting time for many of us -- and it's been a disorienting time for some of us – but only in a good way I hope.

As part of those discussions I have drawn people's attention to something that many people are simply unaware of – which is that there is actually more than one story of Jesus' birth in the Bible – there are three. One of those three stories -- the one from John's gospel is so brief – all it really says is that the word became flesh – that it doesn't really count as a birth narrative. So in actual fact out of the four gospels – the four stories of Jesus life and death that are found in our Bibles—only two tell a story about how Jesus was born.

And those two stories happen to be very different from each other – which is something that easily goes unnoticed by the untrained eye because when we gather on Christmas Eve Every year to retell the story of



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Jesus' birth -- it's mostly Luke's version of the story that we hear -- sometimes with a star and some wise men from Matthew's gospel thrown in for a little dramatic flair.

And when I've pointed this out to people -- or we've discovered it by reading Marcus Borg or John Spong or others-- more than once I've been asked -- well what are we going to do about Christmas?

Now that the gig is up -- now that we know that the church for years has been taking two stories and folding them into one because it makes for a better pageant -- now that we know from our scholarly readings that it's highly unlikely that Jesus' mother was a bonafide virgin when she conceived him -- and that the magi didn't show up in Matthew's gospel until the baby was 3 years old just what are we going to tell people when they show up on Christmas Eve?

What truth are we going to gather around if it's not the factual truth about a baby born to a virgin on a star studded night in a manger in a stable while shepherds watched their flocks nearby and angels hovered overhead?

If we're in a bah humbug kind of mood the truth we could gather around is the truth that for centuries the early church didn't bother to celebrate Christmas because they believed that Easter was the most central festival of the Christian year. The writer of Mark's gospel thought the story of Jesus birth was so insignificant that he didn't bother starting his story about Jesus life until Jesus was about 30 years old. So if you are in a bah humbug kind of mood this Christmas there's good biblical and ecclesial precedent for you to skip the entire season.

But if you do love the season are you are looking for something with deeper meaning this year there's actually lots of it to be found as we delve into the two stories of the nativity that we do have.

For example in Luke's version of the story there's truth to be found in the way power for change and new life is centered at the margins -- among young girls and lowly shepherds

- there's truth in the way that the world caught up in the fast pace of commerce and trade provides little or no room for humble beginnings or for pausing for holy moments --
- there's truth in the way a mother treasures in her heart the possibility that maybe her child could be the one to bring healing to a hurting world
- there's truth in the way that God is born into the world in ordinary places through ordinary human lives and ordinary human action
- There's truth in the way that we are often completely caught off guard and dazzled into awe and wonder by the power of the holy in our world.

In Matthew's version of the story there are harder truths to appropriate. Unlike Luke who takes his time telling the story of Jesus birth -- using ritual and poetry to slow down our thoughts and paint lovely pictures of angel choirs in our minds -- Matthew's story begins by plodding through 17 verses of genealogy linking Jesus back to King David --and then a quick 7 verses to tell us about a woman named Mary who is engaged to a man named Joseph but is found to be with child by the holy spirit -- prompting Joseph to dismiss her quietly -- until he is told by an angel in a dream that he's to wed Mary have the baby -- and name his Jesus.



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Joseph wakes up – takes Mary for his wife – has no marital relations with her until she gives birth and then he names the baby Jesus.

No census, no stable, no shepherds, no angel choir. End of story

– Now you know why we don't use this version much on Christmas Eve.

And although there is lovely truth in the way that Joseph, a good and faithful, traditional man, is called to partner with God in bringing about justice and peace in the world using the most unconventional means – for me the deeper truths of Matthew's version of the story lie in the Events that take place some time after the birth.

Because its only in Matthew that we get the story of King Herod who seeks to kill the baby Jesus when he finds out about this alluring baby king that has been born and he orders the slaughtering of all boys under the age of three – it's only in Matthew that Mary and Joseph are warned in a dream to take the baby and flee into Egypt.

And so this is the only story of Jesus' birth that upholds the age-old truth that all new life is vulnerable – all– new political and social thought – new relationships -- Even new ways of being church – and so we must protect new beginnings and be careful and even cunning with them.

It's only in this story that the Christ light is born into a world where there is explicit violence and real threat to humankind.

It's only this story that through the inclusion of strangers who visit the Christ child from the East stresses the important truth that the real gifts of Christmas—the gifts of peace and goodwill for all are meant for all humankind and not just for a select few.

It's only this story that with its guiding star reminds us of the truth that Even in the darkest of nights and in the most fearsome of circumstances there is a beacon of light guiding our way –and calling us home.

And so we celebrate – not because of any dogma or doctrine that someone has told us we have to believe in order to count ourselves in as Christians – not because Mary was or wasn't a virgin – or because there we 3 or 30 wise men or wise women who did or didn't bring gifts to the newborn king.

We celebrate because in this story we recognize truths about the mystery of God – and truths about ourselves – truths that point to the strength of human capacity – the depths of divine love – the ways of peace and justice and the awesome wonder of what it means to be alive.