

TELLING THE CHRISTMAS STORY - 2008

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Text: Luke 2:1-8

Introduction: Once again, as we do every year, we are celebrating the Christmas season. Again, we will **retell** the story of the birth of Christ. And once again, we will **combine information from the Gospels** always aware of not only our contemporary religious significance but also the secular and business dependency surrounding this special day.

In telling the Christmas story, it is helpful to look at the four Gospels and to see what each one says and does not say. I believe that it is important to understand the purpose and the audience for which the Gospel writers are addressing their narratives. And, I believe that it is helpful to see the significant emphases and themes that are found in the Gospels.

I. The Christmas Story in the Gospels:

A. Mark - his Gospel on the one hand is the first written Gospel. On the other hand he represents a new breed of Christians, one who has been exposed to a much greater world than simply Palestinian Judaism. He grew up in Bethany. His mother was a Jewish Christian. Yet his uncle, Barnabas was a Jewish Christian from Cyprus, who was a leader in the church at Antioch of Syria, which preached directly to Gentiles (non-Jews) and where both groups worshipped on an equal basis. Mark joined his uncle and Paul on the first missionary journey, then later on joined Barnabas again as Paul and Barnabas divided their missionary ministry. We know that Barnabas and Mark traveled to Cyprus to serve. We also know that Mark joined with Peter as his amanuensis or secretary, and they journeyed as missionaries in Asia. We presume that Mark was with Peter in Rome when the latter was executed, and that Mark having heard Peter preach for many years wrote down from memory many of the stories that he had heard. This is found in the Gospel of Mark. So when Mark writes, his concern is for a universal faith that addresses all subjects of the Roman Empire.

Mark does not provide any information on the birth of Jesus. He begins his gospel, his "**good news,**" with a prophesy from **Isaiah 40:3**, which tells of God's messenger who will come "crying in the wilderness, make ready the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." Mark **immediately identifies John the Baptist** as the one who fulfills this prophesy and launches into a narration of **John's ministry**, followed by an account of the **baptism of Jesus**.

Mark seems to be **concerned that his readers (apparently Gentile Christians) understand who Jesus was and the religious implications of his life and ministry, not any details about His birth**. He also is not interested in telling about the birth of Jesus, only in conveying the thrust of his life and ministry and the implications of both for all people.

B. Matthew: Matthew contains a lengthy section, two chapters, relating the birth of Jesus. His **emphasis is on the Jewish world** and his narrative is set in the context of the **Jewish roots of the newborn child** are quickly evident. His bottom line is that this baby, Jesus, is the long-awaited Messiah of the Jewish people.

1. **Genealogy** - Mathew begins immediately with the **genealogy of Jesus Christ -three sets of 14 generations** from Abraham to David; 14 generations from David to the beginning of the Babylonian exile; and 14 generations from the exile to the birth of Jesus - why? Probably for the **ease of memorization**, and certainly to demonstrate that Jesus is Hebrew who can trace his ancestry to Abraham, the father of the Hebrew people. Through the great King David and his ruling descendents, and through Zerubbabel, the king who completed the rebuilding of the second temple after the Exile.

2. Mathew also is committed to making his readers aware that **Jesus was born into a Jewish world politically and socially, as well as religiously** - he focuses on **Herod the Great** - Ruler of the Palestine, King of the Jews - as the ancestors of Jesus included the greatest leaders and rulers of the Hebrew people, so this newborn king, faced the threats of this interloper, who felt threatened by the infant born in Bethlehem, whom Herod calls "King of the Jews".

The family of Jesus goes to Egypt to escape Herod's order of infanticide (**as the Hebrews had gone into Egypt** during the time of Joseph, so goes the family of Jesus).

3. Mathew emphasizes that Jesus is the **fulfillment of Hebrew prophecy**. He cites Isaiah, Zephaniah, Micah, and Jeremiah. He is the **Messiah** predicted by the prophets of old. Later on in his Gospel Mathew more than any other will emphasize that Jesus came to fulfill the law, not destroy it.

Fulfillment of OT prophecy

Matthew will use the most exalted titles from the Hebrew tradition to describe and identify Jesus.

Apparently his readers were Jewish Christians who were concerned that the Jewish foundation of Christianity was being eroded by the massive influx of Gentile Christians.

C. Luke: Luke's Gospel is set in a **thoroughly Roman context** - great attention to names, places, details, the role of the common people in society, the Savior of the world, the underdogs of society - addresses his Gospel to **Theophilus** (a Greek term which translates "one who loves God"). **His Gospel is addressed to Gentiles, non-Jews, and the promises of old are for all people, not simply the descendents of Abraham.**

Genealogy: traces the birth of Jesus all of the way back to **Adam**, not just Abraham (3:23-37)

Story of the **birth of John the Baptist**, who **challenges traditional Jewish leadership** - who calls for an **ethical religion** - who chastises the people for depending on their Jewish roots, the claim that they were descendents of Abraham - that means nothing.

Luke does emphasize the Jewish roots of Jesus - he identifies Him with some of the most exalted names from the Hebrew heritage. But at the same time he identifies the news of the birth of Jesus, when he records that **an angel of the Lord** told the **shepherds** "I bring you good news of a great joy that shall be for **all of the people.**"

Luke also records that a **heavenly multitude** praised God, saying "**Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased.**" Peace through the child comes not simply to those of a Hebrew heritage but to all who please God. For Luke identification with Jesus was not dependent upon ancestry but upon character.

D. John: - nothing about the birth of Jesus - **theological interpretation** - the Word (Greek word, *logos*, communicating idea to a philosophical world) **became flesh** and dwelt among us full of grace and truth - later Jesus came unto his own - they received him not - but to **all** who do believe, the power to become sons of God.

John was interested at the end of the first century in telling his readers who Jesus was theologically - and that everyone who believed in Him could identify with God.

II: Telling the Christmas Story in the 21st Century: How can we be **effective in telling the Christmas story in a world that increasingly secularizes the season**, which more often than not results in a clash over Christmas? In recent years there has been an outcry by some in the Christian community of an attack, a war, upon Christmas? Woe is us! The world is after us again! Fort Collins - tv news bite - a woman says "They are trying to keep Christians from celebrating Christmas - "Bah humbug!"

Are we really prevented from "celebrating Christmas?" Look around. The Christmas decorations testify that we are not void in celebrating Christmas. Look at the Christmas season lights on the homes across Boulder - some certainly reflect the secular approach - snowmen, Santas, reindeer, elves - but many more reflect the Christmas story - nativity scenes, stars, lights say that "Peace on earth . . ."

The two traditions - religious and secular - are like the New Testament stories - they are so blended together that we usually do not differentiate between the two. We celebrate both and enjoy both.

Concerts, symphonies, plays (we saw "A Christmas Carol" in 2006 and 2007, "White Christmas" in 2007 and loved both presentations), ballets ("The Nutcracker" with our friend from Canada, Dana Benton, has become a season tradition for us in Denver), advertisements in newspapers, on and on remind our society of the Christmas story.

A. As we attempt to tell once more the Christmas story, I would suggest that we look at the world about us, that we attempt to listen instead of not simply "correct," and that we tell the Christmas story in a way that our "audience" understands what the coming of the Jesus infant means to the 21st century. Let me begin by saying that as we understand what is happening in our communities, then we can present our narrative in such a way that complements what is being said in a secularized world!

1. Let me begin by saying that the Christmas season as seen through the eyes of a secular world really demonstrates the goodness that is in all of us: Too often we see the bad, the evil in the world. We look at the **greed** and **avarice** present in society, we **condemn the shallowness of the season**, we **observe** the gluttony as we devour huge amounts of food, cookies, cake, candy, etc., and we respond angrily (a nice Christian attribute?) that our contemporary society doesn't understand the "true meaning of Christmas." The world is **evil**, it distorts **this wonderful season**, and we who are Christians are engaged in a **full-scale battle against the world**, which doesn't see the truth as we know it with such certainty.

I want to take a **different approach today**. If we look at what is going on "out there" in a lot of ways **our society demonstrates the goodness that is in all of us**. In spite of the **seasonal rush**, the pushing and shoving at sales, the **crowds**, the holiday themes, the examples of greed, and even the demands that we "de-Christianize" the holiday, if we look around we will see that **people are happy**, that they **greet one another in a positive spirit** (Merry Christmas, Happy Holidays).

People do seem to **go out of their way to convey peace and joy, love and affection**. That **should tell us something about what they hope for, dream of, for our world**. They **portray during Christmas something of the ideal toward which we strive - Peace on earth, joy to the world, home for the holidays**.

Despite all of the hustle and bustle, despite the fact that many people are alone during the Christmas season, despite the indulgence on the one hand and the need on the other, we can still observe a striving toward a better society, a better world.

Christmas is an expression of the conviction that we all believe that our world, our society, can and is in many ways a better place than it normally seems. Christmas approaches an ideal for what we as individuals and we as a society would like to be. Christmas enables us to at least for a period of time approximate all that we believe in terms of goodness and hope and love and joy and peace.

The season does allow **warmth and the caring** to come forth; it does **reveal the family values** for so many which may be missing during much of the year; it **does express hope** in what seems to be a world with little hope. It does **burst forth in expressions of love, compassion, and sharing not only with family and friends, but also those who seem to be downcasts of society**.

A. Telling the Christmas Story in Worship:

1. Traditional Worship:
2. Drama in worship: e.g. "I Am Christmas" dramatic reading
3. Music: cantatas, choral presentations, musical specials

B. Telling the Christmas Story in Symbol: **Displays** - our society seems to be fighting over this issue every year - on the one hand, many Christians insist that nativity decorations be displayed on public property and in holiday parades; on the other hand many public and secular representatives insist on seasonal rather than religious displays - **I don't have the final answer to this debate but I do know**

this - our church is located in the very best place in Boulder - on 13th and Pine, just a few blocks from the County Courthouse and the Pearl Street Mall, near the cultural and economic heart of the city and the county - perhaps a year from now we can creatively present a display that tells the Christmas story with dignity and joy! Maybe we could advertise free parking, set up a display, to assist us, or maybe even other churches in the vicinity.

C. Telling the Christmas Story in Living: The best way to tell the Christmas story is living consistently with the lessons taught and learned from the stories of the Christ child. Our lives should be an interpretation of the Christmas story for all the world to see.

D. Telling a relevant Christmas Story: Does the Christmas story really have anything to say to the 21st century? We are the Gospel writers of this age, this culture, and this world. Is our story simply an echo of the seasonal story characterized by shopping, lights, displays, secular (and I don't mean that in a derogatory way) symbols and music? Or, can we use the attention given to the season to **remind our world how the Christmas story is relevant in the 21st century in Boulder.**

1. In our culture **affluence** unfortunately has resulted in **greed for many**. Even the Christmas season contributes to that idea - But the Gospel story of Christmas tells of rich and poor honoring the Christ child; king and commoner rejoicing in the birth of the Messiah and the Savior of the world; the Christmas story is one of **sharing by all**, the foundation for gift giving in the spirit of Christmas.

2. In our world we continue to be **divided** - politics, race, economics, education, culture - The Christian story is one that tells of the **elimination of those barriers that divide:** princes and shepherds come together to unite around the Christ child;

3. Our world is often characterized by **rejection, emptiness, and arrogance** - the Christmas story is one of **acceptance, fulfillment and worthiness**, and **humility** - **all are welcome** to the stable; the child brings **meaning and purpose**; the child represents **acceptance, respect**

4. Our world is characterized by **war, violence, anger, hurt** - the **Christ child** represents **peace, love, and warmth**

5. **Despair** - The Gospel stories convey **hope and a better day and a better world**

Conclusion: So, what should the Gospel according to 21st century Christians say and emphasize? **Listen** to the sounds and **see** the sights around us, observe the goodness, the kindness, the caring, the dreams and the hopes that are there regardless of the secular or religious foundations of those in our world. And **identify** what they are really telling us.

And, what should **the Gospel Christmas story say according to you say in the 21st century?**

The Christmas story is **much more** than simply a holiday of family, friends, and sharing - it is the **symbol** for the cure of that which ails us; **the healing** of that which wounds us; **the belief that together we can find peace and hope and the love of God expressed through the love of one another.**

Let us tell the Christmas story to our generation in a way that is **not just a celebration of the past but strategy for the present and a foundation for the future!**

MERRY CHRISTMAS TO ONE AND TO ALL - FOR CHRIST IS BORN AND CHRIST IS ALIVE ON THIS DAY