

A Little Too Much Like Us

Matthew 2:13-23; Hebrews 2:10-18

CWZepp, BWCOB, November 25, 2007

In a small Southern town each Christmas, there could always be found a large community nativity scene that was much like those seen in many areas, except for one exceptional detail. The three wise men in this particular display all wore firemen's helmets! One year a woman from the north was traveling through the town, noticed the unusual head pieces on the royalty in the nativity, and couldn't help asking about it from a clerk at a rest stop on her way out of town. The clerk looked dumbfounded. "Don't you Yankees ever read your Bibles?"

The woman assured the clerk that she had read the Bible and the Christmas story, but didn't see what that had to do with the helmets. The clerk pulled out a Bible from behind the counter, turned to the second chapter of Matthew, and handed it to the woman with a finger pointed. "See it says right here, the wise men came from afar!"

During our devotions in staff meeting a few weeks ago each of us were asked to take one of several available nativity scenes, retreat to our office, set it up, and reflect on it and with it for a while, and return with the character in the scene to whom we felt most drawn this year and ready to share why. As I pondered the familiar scene and its characters, I was struck by a somewhat surprising thought which has stuck with me through the past few weeks. I am not drawn to the Christ child of the nativity. I can relate to almost all the other characters in some way or another – I can even relate to the animals who weren't asked whether they wanted to share their quarters with the Holy family and a stream of uninvited guests. But I just can't relate to the baby Jesus of the nativity. Yes, I was a baby once too. Yes, I now have a child of my own, and am awaiting the birth of another. But I don't remember what it was like to be a baby myself. And being a parent helps me relate more to Mary and Joseph, not the baby Jesus.

It was – and is – a thought-provoking realization for me. Because the vision of the nativity is one that has been impressed on most of our minds since childhood. It is rare to find a person who has not at sometime or another dressed themselves up in a bathrobe and sandals to play one of the traditional parts in the annual Christmas nativity of their childhood church. Many of our beloved Christmas carols are based upon the picture, characters, or sentiments of the nativity. And of course, Christmas would not be Christmas in many households without a nativity set above the family mantle.

And aside from minor variations (such as fire retardant helmets on the wise men!) image is almost always the same. Baby Jesus is lying in a manger, often with arms outstretched, sometimes bearing a halo. Mary and Joseph sit behind him adoringly. Flanking them on both sides are animals – a cow, a donkey, some sheep, maybe even a camel – and they too seem to be entranced with this new baby. And of course there are the shepherds, one of whom is often carrying a lamb on his shoulders. Kneeling down in front of the baby are the three wise men offering him their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And rising above the whole scene is the star and the angel that announced the birth of Christ to the world.

It's a beautiful scene – a scene that warms our hearts and fills us with peace and joy each year during the Christmas season, a scene worth writing songs about –

“O little town of Bethlehem, how still we see thee lie.” “Away in a manger” “Angels we have heard on high” “Silent Night, Holy Night”

But if we believe that Jesus was a fully human child, that night might have been holy, but I doubt that it was silent. We may imagine that our nativity scenes and pageants capture some timeless moment from that first Christmas long ago, but the truth about this familiar image of the nativity that we see and celebrate at Christmas is that it is a fictional scene...something created in the imagination of the church over two millennia.

Something I have enjoyed doing over the past several years is to give the youth group a little quiz to see how much they really knew about the Christmas story as we find it in the Bible. Almost without fail, pretty much everyone who takes it would fail the quiz if it was taken for credit, and are surprised to learn about what the Bible really says (and does not say) about the Christmas story, which is, of course, the purpose of the activity. It demonstrates how much we assume about the Christmas story, and how infrequently our assumptions match the biblical birth narratives, or how seldom our images of the nativity match the biblical portrait.

To begin with, not all of the gospels give information about the birth of Jesus. Mark and John offer us absolutely nothing about the birth, choosing to begin their respective gospels with the adult John the Baptist and “the Word”. Add to that the fact that Matthew and Luke disagree in their accounts, so much so that it would be hard to hold up both as being historically accurate in their literal details. Our traditional images of the nativity are conglomerates of these two conflicting stories, with our own little special touches. We get the shepherds and angels from Luke. The wise men come from Matthew. Luke offers us the travel narrative because of the census of Augustus, and so in his gospel we find Jesus born in a stable because there was no room in the inn. In Matthew, we are given no indication that Mary and Joseph ever left their house. They are shown in his gospel as residents of Bethlehem, and there is no hint in Matthew's story that the wise men showed up before Jesus was a toddler.

It is also in Matthew alone that we read the story from our gospel lesson today. Frankly, one could understand why it was not included in the other gospels. And most of us probably would not have minded if Matthew would have left it out as well, and sufficed it to say that the family moved to Nazareth at some point in Jesus' childhood.

But Matthew was not aware that his narrative was going to become a part of some 21st century holiday tradition. He never imagined that his wise men would be cast into porcelain and placed beside a baby in a feeding trough. The Messiah about whom *he* was writing did not arrive in the moment of silent, pristine beauty so often pictured by Hallmark and Hollywood, not to mention the nativities, carols, and pageants. Matthew's Messiah arrived in a world full of chaos. People literally running for their lives. Refugees forced to live in a foreign land. Babies being slaughtered. Mothers weeping for their children. A corrupt and paranoid politician, willing to do anything to eliminate anything or anyone that might challenge his authority. If we look at the story as it is told in Matthew, and lay aside our Christmas pageant nostalgia, we will see that Matthew's Messiah arrived not on a spectacular silent night away in a manger, but rather in a world much like our own.

The so called “real world.” Perhaps that’s why most of us love Christmas so much. For a short season of the year, all the world seems right. People smile more. Homes take on a certain glow of warmth. Families spend quality time together. We experience the fulfillment of giving, and the joy of receiving. And our faith comes more clearly into focus in the celebration of Advent.

But I think deep down, most of us know that all of this is really a temporary high. The Christmas season might allow us to escape from the real world for a time, but before long the effects start to wear off. The trees make their exits from our homes. The lights and decorations are taken down and stored away until next year. The parties and get-togethers wind to a close. And soon it will be time to get about the business of real life once again, complete with forming our new year’s resolutions to counteract the side effects of the Christmas drug, which have evidenced themselves in our expanded waistlines.

I think the Christmas drug has been especially effective these past few years. From terrorist threats to school shootings, from the war in Iraq and Afghanistan to the sub-prime mortgage bust, from spreading cancer to advancing dementia – everyone needed some good old-fashioned holiday cheer. Heaven knows we need some peace on earth these days. But like with any drug, the effects are limited and temporary. No amount of seasonal good will is going to overcome the realities of the real world. No talk of peace on earth will smooth the reality that our nation is at war. No holiday feast can fill the void for those who have lost loved ones, whether through wars, tragedies, accidents, or natural causes. And even for those who have had no trouble celebrating this Christmas, the time of celebration is passing, and our lives are quickly returning to normal.

But in Matthew’s gospel, Christmas was never abnormal. From the first announcement that Jesus was to be born, the real world reigned supreme: a teenage girl copes with an unplanned pregnancy; a man confronts the decision of whether to marry his fiancé who was pregnant with a child that was not his own; a newlywed couple unable to enjoy the fullness of their marriage because of an unexpected pregnancy; a child treasured by some but despised by others; a family flees their home afraid for their lives; an act of terror against the most innocent victims imaginable; a political leader with blood on his hands.

This was real life for Matthew. And real life did not take a “time out” so that the world could celebrate Christmas. The Messiah of Matthew’s gospel was born into a very real and chaotic world – a world that might look a little too much like our own.

That being said, it is important to consider why Matthew might have chosen to include these birth and childhood stories in his gospel. It certainly was not a mandatory part of the “good news”, as evidenced by the lack of any birth narrative in the gospels of Mark and John. But it is clear that Matthew has an agenda for his writing. There is a reason that Matthew chose to report a visit from “wise men” who took notice of his birth and came to pay the child homage. For although the infant Jesus was born into real world chaos, Matthew affirms that this child was destined for a unique and special purpose of God.

Many commentators on this text point to similarities between this story and the story of Moses. Just as Moses escaped death when all the Hebrew baby boys were killed at the orders of a paranoid monarch, so too did Jesus. Moses was once a refugee, so was Jesus. The fact that the holy family fled to Egypt, the land from which Moses led the Israelites. We could imagine that Matthew saw a connection:

Moses was chosen and sent by God to lead a people out of bondage and into freedom. For centuries, the Jews had been waiting for someone like Moses to come again. Matthew was writing his gospel to say “this is the one”. This Jesus is the Messiah, the new Moses, who will lead the people of God out of bondage and into freedom.

But this Messiah did not come into this world in a fleeting moment or for a passing season. Matthew’s Messiah did not come into the world so that we could max out our credit cards and have a happy Christmahanakwanzakuh.

Thank God.

Because those Christmas feelings wear off. Even those with loads of holiday spirit seldom leave their decorations up past the New Year. The high runs its course, and then subsides until next year. It’s nice while it lasts, but despite what we learn in all the Hallmark Christmas feel-good flicks, very few lives are changed for the better because of it. Not so with Matthew’s Messiah. Matthew’s baby Jesus never really seems to fit with the Christmas pageantry. Matthew’s baby Jesus is a little too much like us. And he fits much better into our real world.

I guess that is why I am not drawn to images of the baby Jesus. The Christmas pageant Jesus – the nativity scene Jesus – inhabits a magical, timeless world where angels sing and animals join shepherds and kings in worshipping a baby. Such a Messiah seems out of place in a world like ours. And there is a reason that we see the Christmas nativity for only one month of the year, while the cross remains year-round. Matthew tells us that Jesus began his life as a political refugee. All of the gospels agree that his life was ended as an executed political criminal. The real Jesus was born into chaos, lived a very real life, struggled and died for his cause. That real life – a life which the author of Hebrews says was like ours in every respect – is what brings us salvation. That the life of Christ was a struggle from the start, that the baby Jesus of Matthew is really a little too much like us to be cast into porcelain and set alongside shepherds and animals, that is the glory of the incarnation. That is why we follow, worship, and trust in Jesus. As Hebrews puts it, “He did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham” and “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.”

It’s not exactly your typical holiday feel good story. You won’t get the warm-fuzzy feeling that you get from Christmas pageants and singing “Silent Night” by candlelight from Matthew’s real-world Messiah. But for me at least, I find someone that I can relate to. And after the tree is down and the Jesus of the Nativity has found his comfortable place in the box on the top shelf in the back room until he appears again next year in all his majestic childhood innocence, and after we have found ourselves back in the throws of the real world, we may discover that salvation is not really found in Bethlehem, no matter how still we say it lie. For Matthew’s gospel reminds us of just how fleeting the Nativity is, if indeed it ever truly was. The baby born to Mary grew up fast. The family became refugees. And in the best years of his life he was killed as a criminal on a Roman cross.

And *that* is where you and I will find him. The birth of Christ may be the beginning. But Christmas is fleeting, and the move from nativity to cross is swift. We will need more than a baby in a manger to help us on our journey. Thanks be to God that Jesus is a little too much like us to remain in the manger forever.

Amen.

Prayers Voiced

Holy Jesus, Emmanuel —
 God with us, God for us, God among us;
 you are a wondrous gift of life and light to all people, and you have come to us as a child, a baby.

We gather in these days to peer down into the manger and gaze into the unbelievable —

that you, maker of heaven and earth, would enter the world like this,
 that you, Savior of all, would have a feed box for a cradle,
 that you, God of all time and space, would yield to this state of helplessness.

Yet you yourself knew a world not unlike ours — filled with beauty and aching need. And in the eyes of the Christ child we see glimmers of what is to come:

We see you slipping away from your parents to sit in the synagogue;
 We see you rubbing clay into the eyes of a blind man so that he can see!
 We hear you uttering words of grace:
 "Daughter, your faith has made you well."
 "Rise and walk!"
 "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."
 "I am with you always."

All this goodness, all this meaning and possibility, was once all nestled in a manger. And so we remember, Lord, and we gather in this sacred space, to thank you, to praise you, and to invite you anew to aide in the cradle of our heart, now and always.

Abide with us, Christ child.
 Abide with us, Savior and Lord.
 Abide with us, Christ Jesus. Amen.