

God, Life, and Everything Merry Christmas!

In this season of gift giving and carol singing and tree trimming and parties and stockings and rum balls, let me inject an element of serious contemplation.

Everyone knows that we celebrate the birth of Christ on Christmas. Everyone also knows it wasn't really December 25, but who cares? Who said it had to be exact, and the 25th of December is as good as any day.

That element of uncertainty troubles some people. They think, "What? How can it *not* be the 25th? My world is turned upside down!" Of course, when you read the biblical narratives of Christ's birth, things get a little more confusing. Not only do they never give a date for Christ's birth, but only two of the four gospels even bother with the story of Jesus' birth, and they don't even tell the same story.

Except that they are both extremely serious, political, and radical. And they don't involve Santa.

I thought we'd take a moment to just look at these stories and see how they differ, and yet how they do indeed give the same message.

In the Gospel According to Matthew, Mary is pretty passive. It just says that she was found to be with child while she was engaged to Joseph. This is all about him. He's the aggrieved party who nobly chooses not to publicly shame Mary. Instead, he will quietly divorce her - but in a dream, God tells him to take her as his wife anyway. In Matthew, Mary has no visits from angels, and the baby is not born in a manger. Rather, the only mention of where they stayed in Bethlehem was of a house.

On the other hand Matthew's gospel - and only Matthew's gospel - has the visit of the Wise Men (or Magi). They come, they encounter King Herod who tries to get them to reveal the location of the newborn Messiah, and when they are warned in a dream, they go home a different route so as not to tell Herod where the baby is. Finally, Joseph has another dream in which God tells him to flee to Egypt.

Matthew is serious, political and radical because while Mary is utterly passive, Joseph, the man, takes on a care taker role willingly and submissively. And because it reveals through the Wise Men, God's care, concern and love for not just the Chosen People but for all people (the Wise Men were said to come from all parts of the known world representing gentiles in general).

And because it dealt with the sobering - especially in light of the horrific killings at a school in Pakistan - fact that those in power often care nothing for the weak, even children, who are easily killed with not a single twinge of conscience.

Luke's story is different. There is no talk of divorce, no Wise Men, and no Herod killing the innocents.

Rather, with Luke, it is Mary who's the primary actor. It's she who talks to the angel Gabriel and receives the news that she will give birth. It is she who makes the conscious decision to accept God's will. It is Mary who visits her cousin Elizabeth (the mother of John the Baptist) and proclaims in the words of the Magnificat a message of hope for the poor and warning for the powerful. She is in control and making prophetic claims for the weak and powerless.

As if to underscore this, the couple is forced to go to Bethlehem by the emperor for a census, and there Mary gives birth in a stable, a barn, laying her child in a manger. It is shepherds, not Wise Men, who visit and offer praise for the newborn Messiah. And it is prophets from the temple who proclaim this child to be of God.

In each one of these stories, however, the Good News is for outsiders. The weak, the poor, the foreign - they are the ones whom both Gospels say God will comfort. The strong, rich, influential ... they are the ones each gospel warns. Whether through Matthew's depiction of Herod or Luke's Magnificat, they are warned that God is aware of their abuses.

It's hard to underestimate the impact of these stories - they show God in a new light - and they show that the new Christ, the Messiah, will shake things up.

And he has.

Granted, the world fights back with every attack on the poor or tax break for the rich, with every racial slur or subtle regulation that impacts marginalized social classes. The world fights back against this new Christ every time it calls to respond to violence (whether personal or on a war scale), with more violence. There is no end to those who don't like the way this child grew into the man who taught us how to love in the midst of hate.

And the Christmas stories of Matthew and Luke foreshadow just such hard-heartedness. As much as we love the fun, loud, party-like atmosphere of Christmas, the real story - or stories - are rooted in the real world we live in. And for that, I'm glad.

If you would like to celebrate this radical birth, consider going to church this Christmas Eve or Christmas Day. You can find your church's information at their websites. Or if you want, you can join us at St. James' Episcopal Church on 4526 Albany Post Road. Our Christmas Eve services are at 6:00 pm and 10:00 pm. Our Christmas Day service (at the Chapel on 10 East Market Street) is at 10:00 am.