

The Truth about Christmas

In the name of him whose birth we celebrate today, dear friends in Christ: Ah, the first Christmas. Can you picture it? It's late. The stars are brightly shining. A blanket of fresh snow covers the ground. Joseph trudges forward, leading a donkey on which the virgin mother rides uncomfortably. At increasingly regular intervals she gasps and holds her swollen belly. Her labor has begun. "Please, Joseph. Hurry."

Then, there in the distance they see it: the little town of Bethlehem – illuminated by the ethereal light of a previously unknown star that mysteriously hangs stationary over their intended destination. Convenient, that. "We're almost there", Joseph says to encourage Mary. "Everything will be all right." But the look on his face says he's not sure.

They arrive at the village. Joseph begins knocking on doors. He tries to explain their dire situation, but everyone turns them away coldly. "Go try at the inn", someone says as he slams the door in Joseph's face. But it's no good. Bethlehem is filled with out-of-towners here on account of the census ordered by the Emperor. "I'm terribly sorry", the innkeeper tells Joseph. "We're packed; already doubled up on all our rooms. There's nothing I can do." But he sees the desperation in Joseph's pleading eyes, and Mary on the donkey in the street behind him. "Wait", he says, as Joseph turns away. "Maybe there is something we can do ...if you don't mind ...". He shows Joseph the stable back behind his little business. It's small. There's livestock: cattle, oxen, sheep, some of the visitors' donkeys. But there's a roof, some fresh, dry hay. Joseph realizes it's better than the street. "Oh yes, thank you." He rushes off to get Mary, trying to figure out how he's going to explain it to her; but she's way ahead of him. Instead of registering disappointment on her face when she sees the dirty cow shed, she reassures her young husband. "You were right, Joseph. Everything is going to be all right."

Fast forward a few hours. It's about 2:00 am. Mary rests from her intense but mercifully brief labor. She reclines on a bed Joseph has made for her with straw and a few blankets. The babe lies in the manger looking like a little mummy wrapped in swaddling clothes. He sleeps in heavenly peace. Of course. Joseph stands watch with his staff, presumably on guard against the livestock to keep them from eating the Christ child's mattress. The hungry cattle, feeling a bit resentful, start lowing. The baby awakes. But little Lord Jesus no crying he makes.

Suddenly there's a greater commotion. Shepherds arrive. They cautiously approach the Holy Family, whispering excitedly among themselves. "Yes, this must be it; just as the angels said it would be." Their leader speaks to Joseph quietly, securing permission to come close and admire the infant in the manger. They kneel in adoration, filled with a sense of holy awe. Not much later others arrive: three kings from the east, on camels no less. They are dressed in flowing robes and regal attire. They too kneel humbly before the babe in the manger, presenting their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. A little boy among the shepherds feels bad because he has no gift to give the baby Jesus. So he plays his drum as very best he can, and is rewarded with a smile from the newborn King.

Can you picture it all? It's the perfect nativity scene. *And almost all of it is not true.* The vast majority of it is stuff people made up, or put together out of sequence, or merely imagined.

Where to begin? We don't know the date of Jesus' birth, whether it was in December or any other month of the year. But the fact that shepherds had their flocks in the fields overnight suggests that it wasn't winter. Even if it was, you can forget about the snow. It happens in Bethlehem about as often as it does in San Diego. And the stars shining? We have no idea what the weather conditions were. It might have been overcast. The Bible doesn't say.

Nor does it say anything about a donkey, or an innkeeper, or a stable, or livestock of any kind. It doesn't say how long Mary and Joseph were in Bethlehem before the birth of Jesus. They may have been there for weeks when Mary went into labor. You protest, "But the Bible says 'they laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn'." Yes. But what does that mean? Prepare to have your images shattered: it's highly unlikely that a town such as Bethlehem would have had anything like we would call an inn. It just wasn't part of the culture or the economy. Overnight visitors usually stayed with people in their private homes. The word we usually translate as "inn" really means "sleeping place". The standard peasant home in the period had three rooms. In the middle would be the main room. It served as kitchen, dining room, and living room. On one side of it would be the sleeping room, where the whole family slept together. And on the other side of the main living area would be the room for the livestock, which for a peasant family would consist of only a few sheep or goats. It would typically have a separate entrance, adjacent to the door to the main room. In between the main room and the room for the livestock, there'd be a wall, of course; but part of it would be open – a window with a sort of cage of wooden slats and a trough on the other side that would allow someone in the main room to put fodder out for the livestock, and where it would be kept up off the floor to keep it clean. That's the kind of manger Jesus was most likely laid in. And what probably happened was that Joseph and Mary stayed with relatives in Bethlehem. Joseph had connections there. There wasn't enough room in the sleeping room for all of them, so the Holy Couple slept in the main room. When Jesus was born, they put him in the readymade bed that happened to be there in the wall. No need to worry about the sheep eating his mattress. The Bible tells us that they were out in the fields with the shepherds. The room for the livestock was probably empty.

What else? The part about the shepherds coming is true. That's biblical. But the three kings? No so much. First, they were wise men, probably astrologers; not kings. We don't know how many of them there were, the bible doesn't say. The number three comes from the three kinds of gift they brought. There may have been only two of them or twenty or more. We simply don't know. But we do know they didn't come the night Jesus was born. They showed up later; weeks, months, up to a year or more later. So, I'm sorry to say that the standard nativity scene were so familiar with is simply wrong. I am not sorry to say that there was no little drummer boy. I really hate that song and the silly story that goes with it.

And since I'm debunking Christmas myths, let me bury one more. This one comes from people who claim that Christmas has its origins as a pagan holiday. They say December 25th was chosen as the date to celebrate Jesus' birth by the emperor Constantine, who, after his conversion to Christianity, decided to use it as a way to override and hijack a boisterous festival held at that time of year known as Saturnalia, or the feast of the Unconquerable Sun. The story goes that since people were celebrating then anyway, he'd just give them something Christian to celebrate allowing them to keep all their same pagan traditions. Therefore Christmas is evil, and we shouldn't celebrate it. How many of you have heard this or something like it?

Well, it's not true. Christians were celebrating Christmas on December 25th a 100 years before Constantine came along. They chose that date because some of the early church fathers believed that Jesus was *conceived* on March 25th, the same date they calculated that he later died on first Good Friday. So they set that date for the annual celebration of the

Annunciation, which marks when the angel Gabriel told Mary that she would bear the Christ Child. That was the true moment of the Incarnation: when God took on human flesh in the Virgin's womb. And that was the feast the early church put a lot of emphasis on, second only to Easter. It was sometime afterward that somebody got the bright idea to count nine months later and celebrate Jesus' birthday also. But that's how they came up with December 25th for Christmas. So don't let anyone tell you that it comes from a pagan holiday. They don't know what they're talking about.

Celebrating Christmas is a good thing; but we've seen that a lot of popular notions about the first Christmas simply aren't true – or at very least that they don't come from the Bible. But I don't want to be misunderstood. I'm not telling you to go home and throw away your favorite crèche because it isn't quite accurate. And if you want keep on imagining Joseph leading a donkey on which Mary sits while they travel to Bethlehem, that's fine.

The issue is this: not long ago I mentioned in a sermon how we in the church tend to accumulate and hoard things, specifically ideas and traditions and stories that don't come from God's Holy Word. As we've seen, the story of our Lord's Nativity is an especially popular place for these sorts of unbiblical barnacles to grow. And that can be problematic for several reasons. First, I've come across people who've long taken all those unscriptural additions as Gospel truth; but then comes the day when they sit down and actually read what Bible says. Lo and behold, they find no donkey, no innkeeper, no lowing cattle or oxen keeping time (whatever that means), and they feel they've been lied to. They begin to wonder about what else they've been deceived. For some, that might get them to dig deeper into Scripture, which is good; but for others it can lead to a crisis of faith and lead them away from the church. That's not good.

The greater danger, however, is that all the added stuff can and often does obscure and crowd out what's really important in the story. We complain about how Christmas has been so commercialized, feeling that we have to remind everyone that "Jesus is the reason for the season"; but we don't see how we in the church push Jesus and the meaning of his birth out of the center of the celebration with all the extras and traditions we tack on. A Pastor I know said it like this: "Here we are celebrating the Son of God becoming flesh for our salvation, and yet most of us find it more spiritually meaningful and moving to hold a candle and sing *Silent Night* in a darkened church on Christmas Eve than to kneel at the altar on Christmas Day and receive the very body and blood of the Christ who was born to save us." That don't make no sense! We let sappy sentimentality trump the Sacrament. We'd rather sing *about* Jesus than actually receive him into ourselves for the forgiveness of our sins. That's missing what Christmas is all about.

We don't want to do that. And that's why I chose two Christmas readings from John for our consideration this morning: one from his Gospel and the other from his first general letter. And you might think they don't look like Christmas readings. They don't say anything about Mary or Joseph or Bethlehem or the manger or shepherds or angels. That's right. John doesn't get us lost in the details. He cuts right to the heart of the matter: what Christmas is really all about. In the Gospel he tells us that the Eternal Word, the Second Person of the Trinity, that is, the Son, through whom and by whom all things were called into existence, the Word who is the Life and Light of the world, *he* became flesh and dwelt among us. *That's* what Christmas is all about.

And in the Epistle, John tells us why. "In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins." That, my friends, is the truth about Christmas. God became flesh to live for us, to

die for our sins, and to rise again that we might live through him. And now, to assure us of this, in love he continues to give us his flesh, his blood, and his Holy Spirit so that we may continue to live – and to love each other – through faith in him. Therefore as you go forth from here to celebrate the season amid the lights and decorations and festive meals and whatever else your own favorite traditions include, keep this precious truth front and center: On this day God gave us Christ his Son to save us. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!