

Articles of Faith December 2019

December 10/12, 2019

Headlines for the Holidays: Christmas story varies by Gospel

By Dennis Kennedy

<http://blogs.denverpost.com/hark/2013/12/17/headlines-for-the-holidays-the-gospels-tell-very-different-christmas-stories/2827/>

Dear Articulates,

The variations in the Gospel stories of the birth of Christ fascinate me. This blog post is a brief description of some of the differences. During our time together, we will read each of the gospel accounts. While there are plenty of Bibles here at the church, if you want to bring your own, you might find that helpful. Thanks! Robin

The buying and selling of Christmas can get old — have you stumbled on Zombie Santa? — but when I see a family driving home with a tree tied to the top of the car, my heart melts every time.

Blessed Days, friends, and they've been that way for a long time. As farmer-poet Wendell Berry writes, "The whole shooting match is holy. Things aren't sacred or not sacred, they are sacred or desecrated. Wherever we abuse the land or allow oppression of people is desecration of a sacred place."

I find really hearing the Christmas story helps me keep it holy.

For instance, do you know there's no mention of three kings in the Gospels? Three gifts, yes, but not how many strangely dressed dudes bear them. Much of what we think is the Christmas story, what pageants impress on us, is a melange or composite from our childhood.

When someone cries, "What do ya mean there aren't three kings?" I simply say, read the Gospels. Only two of them, Matthew and Luke, say anything about Christmas; Mark starts with John the Baptist, and in John theology takes first place — "In the beginning was the Word," which became flesh, without any specifics.

It's important to see Matthew and Luke have completely different accounts and agendas about Christmas. The best book on this is by Marcus Borg and Dominic Crossan in "The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus's Birth." It helps not to harmonize or homogenize Christmas, let each Gospel speak. The context is first century Israel, inhabited by Jewish peasants but firmly under the thumb of Imperial Rome. There are three Roman legions parked just north in Syria to quell rebellion after the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C. The adult Jesus proclaims, following John the Baptist's death, that "the Reign of God is at hand!" It's so close you can reach and touch it.

Matthew's Morning Headline: "Evil Ruler Slaughters Male Infants, Predestined Child Escapes!" Always, if it bleeds, it leads. Subheading: "Jesus is the Renewed Moses."

Matthew writes in Hebrew, his audience Jewish Christians. His gospel parallels the Pentateuch: Five major sections, five addresses, mountaintop face-offs. His Christmas story has the Egyptian sojourn, fleeing the "Pharaoh" Herod, five dreams from an angel to Joseph, the dad, and five fulfillments of the dreams. What's unique and only in Matthew: The Star, Wise Guys from the East, Herod, Egypt, Innocents and Return from Exile.

Luke's Headline is way different: "Angels, Shepherds, Prophets Sing Coming of the Promised Peace Child!" Animals and babies are always a hit. Subheading: "Jesus Follows Tough Act in John the Baptist." Luke writes in Greek, for a gentile Christian audience. His Gospel is for the nations, the story full of thrilling women, Mary,

Elizabeth, Anna, with an emphasis on the marginalized and the Holy Spirit, which is even clearer in Luke's Book Two, the Acts of the Apostles. Unique to Luke is the parallel between John and Jesus (the former recedes, the latter ascends). The Angel comes to Mary not Joseph. There are glorious songs, shepherds, the Manger, and twice, the Temple.

Even the always boring and obscure genealogies are different. Matthew runs from Abraham on down to Jesus, the Messiah, fulfilling prophecies of Jewish scripture. Luke moves back from Joseph to Adam, with Jesus as the new Adam. Titles are vividly important in the Gospels: Genealogy is destiny. So if Caesar Augustus claims to be virgin born, divine, Son of God, Prince of Peace, Lord, Savior of the World, and Most High — all names used when lackey biographers kowtow to the Boss of Rome — well, Jesus the Christ deserves those titles, too.

The Christmas pageant for our time presents a clear choice. Is the Reign of God — a time when and a place where God's way holds sway — to be a new but better empire, like Rome? The Caesar of Rome believed in peace through victory. The way of Jesus achieves peace through justice. The poor, not the ones with the most presents, are central to the Reign of God that Jesus preached. When you remove Christmas from adage and garbage, the Light, the Star and the Child are One.

December 17/19, 2019

A Christmas Reflection

By Barbara Brown Taylor

<https://www.dwtx.org/departments/communications/dwtx-blog/a-christmas-reflection-by-barbara-brown-taylor>

“Once upon a time – or before time, actually, before there were clocks or calendars or Christmas trees – God was all there was. No one knows anything about that time [really] because no one was there to know it, but somewhere in the middle of that time before time, God decided to make a world. Maybe God was bored or maybe God was lonely or maybe God just liked to make things and thought it was time to try something big. Whatever the reason, God made a world and filled it with the most astonishing things: with humpback whales that sing and white-striped skunks that stink and birds with more colors on them than a box of Crayola crayons. The list is way too long to go into here, but suffice it to say that at the end when God stood back and looked at it all, God was pleased.

Only something was missing. God could not think what it was at first, but slowly it dawned on him. Everything he had made was gorgeous and interesting and it all fit together really well, only there was nothing in the world that looked like him, exactly. It was as if [God] had painted this huge masterpiece and then forgotten to sign it, so God got busy making his signature piece, something made in his own image, so that anyone who looked at it would know who the artist was.

He had one single thing in mind at first, but as he worked God realized that one thing all by itself was not the kind of statement he wanted to make. He knew what it was like to be alone, and now that he had made a world he knew what it was like to have company, and company was definitely better. So God decided to make two things instead of one, which were alike but different, and both would be reflections of him – a man and a woman who could keep him and each other company. Flesh was what he made them out of – flesh and blood – a wonderful medium, extremely flexible and warm to the touch. Since God, strictly speaking, was not made out of anything at all, but was pure mind, pure spirit, he was very taken with flesh and blood.

Watching his two creatures stretch and yawn, laugh and run, [God] found to his surprise that he was more than a little envious of them. He had made them, it was true, and he knew how fragile they were, but their very breakability made them more touching to him, somehow. It wasn't long before God found himself falling in love with them. He liked being with them better than any of the other creatures he had made, and he especially liked walking with them in the garden in the cool of the evening.

It almost broke God's heart when they got together behind his back, did the one thing he had asked them not to do and then hid from him – from him! – while he searched the garden until way past dark, calling their names over and over again.

Things were different after that, God still loved the human creatures best of all, but the attraction was no [longer] mutual. Birds were crazy about God, especially ruby-throated hummingbirds. Dolphins and raccoons could not get enough of him, but human beings had other things on their minds. They were busy learning how to make things, grow things, buy things, sell things, and the more they learned to do for themselves, the less they depended on God.

Night after night God threw pebbles at their windows, inviting them to go for a walk with him, but they said they were sorry, they were busy. It was not long before most human beings forgot all about [GOD]. They called themselves “self-made” men and women, as if that were a plus and not a minus. They honestly believed they had created themselves, and they liked the result so much that they divided themselves into groups of people who looked, thought, and talked alike. Those who still believed in God drew pictures of him that looked just like them, and that made it easier for them to turn away from the people who were different.

You would not believe the trouble this got them into: everything from armed warfare to cities split right down the middle, with one kind of people living on that side of the line and another kind on the other. [It was just too much!] God would have put a stop to it all right there, except for one thing. When God had made human beings, he had made them free. [Freedom] was built into them just like their hearts and brains were, and even God could not take it back without killing them. [And God didn't want to kill them, so he] left them be free, [even though] it almost killed him to see what they were doing to each other.

[God did everything he could to get their attention.] He shouted to them from the sidelines, using every means he could think of, including floods, famines, manna, and messengers. He [even tried more personal approaches. He] got inside people's dreams, and if that did not work he woke them up in the middle of the night with his whispering. No matter what he tried, however, he came up against the barriers of flesh and blood. They were made of it and God was not, which made translation difficult. God would say, “Please stop before you destroy yourselves!” but all they could hear was thunder. God would say, “I love you as much now as the day made you,” but all they could hear was a loon calling across the water.

[There was one] exception to this sad state of affairs: [babies]. While their parents were all but deaf to God's messages, babies didn't have any trouble hearing God at all. They were all the time laughing at God's jokes or crying with God when he cried, which went right over their parents' heads. ‘Colic,’ the grown-ups would say, or ‘Isn't she cute? She's laughing at the dust mites in the sunlight.’ Only she wasn't, of course. She was laughing because God had just told her it was cleaning day in heaven, and that what she saw were fallen stars the angels were shaking from their feather dusters.

[Not only did babies hear and understand God, they had other advantages.] Babies did not go to war. Babies never made hate speeches or littered or refused to play with each other because they belonged to different political parties. Babies were crazy about God and they hung on his every word. [Perhaps best of all, they] depended on other people for everything necessary to their lives so a phrase like “self-made babies” would have made them laugh until their [little] bellies hurt. While no one asked babies’ opinions about anything that mattered (which was too bad because it would have been a smart thing to do), almost everyone seemed to love them, and that gave God an idea. [If God was a baby, they would all love him! Why not create himself as one of these delightful creatures?

He tried the idea out on his cabinet of archangels. At first they were all very quiet. [They looked down at their feet and they exchanged sidelong glances with each other, but none of them looked back at God, and for a long time none of them responded.] Finally the senior archangel stepped forward to speak for all of them. [She] told God how much they would worry about him, if he did that. [Why, God] would be putting himself at the mercy of his creatures, the archangel said, [and they were extremely unpredictable and unreliable and they could be down right mean.] People could do anything they wanted to him, and if he seriously meant to become one of them there would be no escape for him if things turned sour. ‘Couldn’t he at least create himself as a magical baby with special powers?’ [the archangel asked] It would not take much – just the power to become invisible, maybe, or the power to hurl bolts of lightning if the need arose. ‘The baby idea was a stroke of genius’ the archangel said, ‘it really was, but it lacked adequate safety features.’

God listened to the archangel [because God always listens, and then] thanked the archangels for their concern but said no, he thought he would just be a regular baby. How else could he gain the trust of his creatures? How else could he persuade them that he knew their lives inside out, unless he lived one [just] like theirs? There was a risk – he knew that. Okay, there was a high risk, but that was part of what he wanted his creatures to know: that he was willing to risk everything to get close to them, in hopes that [they might know that he loved them and] that they would love him again.

It was a daring plan, and once the angels saw that God was dead set on it, they broke into applause. Despite the danger to God, they could see it was a brilliant plan and they clapped and praised God with [the kind of applause] that goes on and on when you have [seen] something you know you will never see again. While they were still clapping, God turned around and left the cabinet chamber, shedding his robes as he went. The angels watched as his midnight blue mantle fell to the floor, so that all the stars on it collapsed in a heap. Then a strange thing happened. Where the robes had fallen, the floor melted and opened up to reveal a scrubby brown pasture speckled with sheep and – right in the middle of them – a bunch of shepherds. sitting around a campfire drinking wine out of a skin. It was hard to say who was more startled, the shepherds or the angels, but as the shepherds looked up at them, the angels pushed their senior archangel to the edge of the hole. Looking down at the human beings who were all trying to hide behind each other (poor things, no wings), the angel said in as gentle a voice as [s]he could muster, ‘Do not be afraid; for see I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.’ And away up the hill from the direction of town, came the sound of a newborn baby’s cry.”

December 24/26, 2019-No Articles of Faith

December 31, 2019/January 2, 2020-No Articles of Faith