



St. Andrew's By-the-Sea
The Episcopal Church
in Destin, Florida

“Hope in the midst of doubt”
1st Sunday after Christmas – Dec. 31, 2023
John 1:1-18

A Homily by The Rev'd Jo Popham

We put baby Jesus into the crèche at home on Christmas Eve. The figure of the baby has outreached arms that look like he is reaching out to his birth mother Mary. But consider that he is reaching out to us – reaching out to embrace us, to comfort us. Little children understand this. I wish we could embrace the joy of Christmas like a little child! But, no, we are too mature in our thought processes to live as though we believe in the Christmas story. Or perhaps we are simply afraid to live the truth of the nativity of our Lord. We are quick to point out the inconsistencies in the stories of the beginning of Jesus's life. In the Gospel according to John, there is no review of Jesus' lineage, no mention of a virgin birth, no infancy narrative at all, and no kings who traveled far to worship a wee babe in a manger. This morning we heard the prologue of the Gospel according to John – an overture of sorts that gives us a taste of what will be revealed in this post-Easter version of the gospel. And it is a cryptic foretelling at best, with Jesus – the Word – becoming flesh to live among us. So every year we hear the nativity story from Luke, because Luke gives us the best account of the birth of Jesus. But even in Luke there is no star, no magi, and the announcement from heaven is made to lowly shepherds – poor and despised shepherds – members of the lower class. We adults have heard the Christmas story so often that we tend to conflate all the different Gospel writers' versions. But when we look at them individually there are many and varied stories within the story. And there are discrepancies between all the versions. This is not to debunk the story of Jesus's birth – far from it. Rather, let us stop and think about the difference between accuracy and truth. Something can be true and not be factually correct. Still we grown-ups ask why do the Gospel accounts of Jesus's birth differ so from history?

In the Gospel according to John Jesus's birth took place at the time of Herod the Great, the puppet king of Judea, setting the birth of our savior on the stage of world history.¹ Luke

also set the story of Jesus's birth in the context of political struggle in the midst of protests against the taxation of Rome, but moreover in the middle of the imperial and religious claims of Rome. Caesar Augustus – the revered, the august – was Emperor of Rome and was considered divine.² Was Caesar the savior of the world or was it Jesus? Was the good news Caesar's birth or Jesus's arrival – full of grace and truth?

Yes, there are discrepancies in history about the dates of the census and about whether Rome even required people to make the trek to their homeland to register.³ But should we be concerned about Luke's timeline or how broad the Roman census was? Not at all – the claims that Luke made are not dependent upon the accuracy of historical detail. What was important for Luke – and what is important for us – and what should be preeminent in our minds – is the good news of Jesus's birth, the joy and happiness he brought and still brings to us. It is Jesus, of course, who fulfilled the prophecies of the Old Testament – not Caesar. In Luke's birth narrative Joseph, the descendant of David, returned to his birth place to fulfill the promises made by David, traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem in obedience to the Emperor's decree. Jesus came not to overthrow Rome but to usher in God's Kingdom.

In the Gospel according to Matthew the story begins with Jesus's birth in Bethlehem and the holy family moves to Nazareth to fulfill the prophecy of Scripture. Both Luke and Matthew express the faith of the authors that Jesus's birth was according to God's plan as revealed in Scripture. And in the Gospel according to John, we know that indeed it was God's plan from the very beginning to send the light of Christ to all people. It is the collective message of the Gospel that reconciles the stories one to another so that we can see the truth in them.

But surely the Virgin birth is too far from believable for us enlightened people. How can this be true in the 21st century. Phyllis Tickle in her book *The Great Emergence*, said we CAN find truth in the story of the virgin birth. She told the story of a young man who had just heard the birth narrative for the first time. He stood up in a room full of skeptics and said with confidence: "The Virgin birth is so beautiful that it has to be true, whether it happened or not."⁴ Some are confused and ask whether Mary remained a virgin, but if we look at the

context of 1st century life, differences can be explained for us modern thinkers. Luke calls Jesus Mary's "first-born son".⁵ And that presents some readers with the dilemma of whether Mary remained a virgin, especially when Luke later refers to Jesus's brothers.⁶ And brothers could be translated as near kin, cousins, or his half brothers – the sons of Joseph by a previous marriage.

Does the absence of the elaborations that include an innkeeper and a cave rather than a stable in Luke's account really matter? Luke simply related the story of an engaged couple who are about to become parents. Clearly Luke believed this birth to be special and unique, but not for some supernatural reason, but rather for Godly reasons – because of Jesus's relationship with God. For Jesus – for the Son of God – to be born at all, sharing our vulnerability and weaknesses from his very beginning is what is important to Luke – and to John. It is Jesus's humanity that was important in Luke and his oneness with God in John. Jesus shared our life in his birth, in his ministry to us, and in dying for us. And yet from the very beginning there was not a place for the newborn Messiah. There was "no room" and the world would not make a place for the Son of God.⁷ Throughout his ministry Jesus would find "no vacancy signs" and would finally be buried in a borrowed tomb. Our Lord was born "out back" of the inn and placed in a manger to sleep. And John told us that Jesus "came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." Do you suppose the world would have found a place for Caesar?⁸

In Luke, it was to the shepherds – the outcasts of society – that the good news of great joy was proclaimed by the angels. They saw the newborn baby – the Messiah, the true Savior of the world reaching up to them, and they recognized the love and peace he was offering the world. They were comforted by God's presence in the wee tiny baby with his outstretched arms.

Again, a story need not be factually accurate to be true. The truth is that the savior of the world has come to us – and to all the world – to love us so that we will know God's love – and to give us work to do in spreading his message. He was – and is – reaching up his arms to offer us hope. In Jesus's ministry– his birth, life, death and resurrection – he still reaches

out to those who have not heard the story. We have something wonderful to share – the love and comfort and hope of the story of Jesus the Christ.

Jesus, even as a baby, was doing this for the entire world – lovingly offering comfort – a “there, there” pat on the back.⁹ Our Lord Jesus was opening his arms to love all people. He offered his outstretched arms – reaching up to show us God and God’s love and God’s will for us. He was – and still is – offering us the joy of the reign of God.

My prayer is that we accept the truth of the Christmas story – what Jesus offers with outstretched arms from the manger – and from the cross. May we accept the joy and happiness of being loved by our Lord Jesus Christ who was – and is – providing the opportunity for us to do God’s will, and ultimately the way to bring about the hope of God’s reign on earth.

Lord, may it be true. Amen.

¹ John 1:5.

² Caesar Augustus was the grand-nephew and adopted heir of Julius Caesar. So it was Octavian – the august – the revered – who was eventually appointed to rule over Judea after Herod’s death. The title Emperor Augustus carried not only political but religious reverence. So it was during Emperor Augustus’s reign that Jesus was born. Quirinius was indeed governor of Syria, the Roman territory to the northeast of Judea; it was this Quirinius who carried out the census before Judea came under Roman rule. The Jews were outraged that they would have to pay tribute to a pagan government (Luke 20:20-26). A resistance movement – sometimes violent protests – began in Galilee (Acts 5:37). This movement would lead to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. (*The People’s New Testament Commentary*, M. Eugene Boring & Fred B. Craddock, pp.180-182.)

³ The census or registration that Luke mentioned was actually ten years after Herod’s death. Quirinius was governor of Syria, the Roman territory northeast of Judea; it was Quirinius who carried out the census before Judea came under Roman rule. But it was really just Judea not the whole world being registered. And it was not the practice of Roman to order people to return to their native towns to register. Luke was writing after the events that he narrated, so likely try as he might, he did not have absolutely accurate historical information.

⁴ Phyllis Tickle, *The Great Emergence* p. 149.

⁵ Luke 2:7.

⁶ Luke 8:19-21.

⁷ Luke 2:7.

⁸ *The People’s New Testament Commentary*, M. Eugene Boring & Fred B. Craddock. *Passim*.

⁹ As a baby, one of my children would never hold on to me as most babies do. Rather he would reach around my neck and pat me on the back when I held him. Even now as a grown man – a 6’7” man – he still does that “there, there” pat when he hugs me.