



Christmas Day
December 25, 2009
The Rev. Charles E. Connelly

I was having lunch earlier this week at the Capitol Grille with my sister, my brother-in-law, and two of my lovely nieces. At one point in our conversation, I remarked that I would be preaching this morning. I asked if any of them had any ideas, noting that this will be my third Christmas Day sermon in Saint John's and that I am running out of new things to say. One of my nieces, Annie McAdams, suggested that I simply say the following: "It's Christmas Day. You are here. You know the story. End of sermon."

So now you have heard Annie's sermon. I am sure many of you appreciate the brevity of it, but you are still going to hear mine.

As I thought about Annie's sermon later in the week, a question occurred to me. Do you really know the story, or more accurately, the stories? There are two of them, you know. One story is in the Gospel According to Matthew and the other, the one we heard this morning, is in the Gospel According to Luke. Over the centuries they have been melded into one through art, literature, music and poetry, but the two stories are strikingly different.

When you think of that first Christmas Day, do you think about three wise men gathered around the manger? You remember; "We three kings of orient are, bearing gifts we traverse afar?" That is what we saw in our Christmas pageant yesterday. Heartwarming, isn't it? But it's wrong. The wise men are in Matthew where there is no stable or manger. In Matthew, the wise men visit Jesus and Mary in a house in Bethlehem well after his birth, perhaps a year later. Are you sure there were three wise men? Actually, the Bible does not tell us how many there were. We know that from songs like, "We three kings of orient are..."

My purpose this morning is not to deconstruct the Christmas story. The melding of the two is actually quite beautiful. It is the way most of us see Christmas, and that is good. It

is just that looking at the distinctive nature of the two stories can add a certain amount of richness to our understanding of the enormity of the importance of that first Christmas Day.

Matthew's gospel is about men, politics, and power. A lengthy genealogy traces Joseph's ancestry back to King David. This is a gospel about Joseph and the hard decisions he had to make after he learned that Mary was pregnant. It is Joseph's faith that leads him to protect Mary from being stoned to death and to become the stepfather of God's son, even at the risk of becoming a social outcast.

It is in Matthew's account that Jesus is attended by wise men from the east bearing the most expensive of gifts. It is in Matthew that we hear about vicious intrigue in King Herod's court. Terrified by the seemingly irrational fear that he would be supplanted by a little baby, he concocts a secret plot to trick the wise men into revealing the location of the Christ child. The plot was thwarted when the wise men wised up and returned home by another route. Ultimately Herod had all the baby boys who were under two years old slaughtered in an attempt to kill this baby who was God.

Matthew's story is one befitting of the birth of a king. Understanding this story within the context of the oppressive Roman Empire and the wicked King Herod makes clear the horrifying peril into which this helpless little baby was born.

Now we turn to Luke's gospel; the gospel we hear this morning. Luke's gospel is about women, the poor and the oppressed. It is one of reversals. No kings. No wise men. God's only son enters the world in the most humble of circumstances, born in a stable, which was probably more like a cave, then placed in a feed trough. Here we hear almost nothing about Joseph. The angel speaks to Mary and her relative, Elizabeth. In Luke we hear about Mary's faith in God, not Joseph's.

How is the most miraculous of all miracles announced? To the king and his court? No, none of that in Luke. An angel of the Lord makes the most astonishing announcement of all eternity to a group of shepherds. Shepherds! Shepherds were ritually unclean; total outcasts. If you had been there, you might have looked at a shepherd about the same way you would look today at a panhandler in a dark alley in New York coming toward you with a knife in his hand. Yet it was to them that God chose to announce the birth of his son.

How did the shepherds respond? They abruptly left their pastures and went to see the Christ child. After they visited the stable, "...they made known what had been told them about this child..." They returned to their pastures, "...glorifying and praising God for all

that they had heard and seen.” For Luke, the only faithful response to the Good News is to go and tell others.

Yes, Luke’s story is very different from Matthew’s. When we look at both stories side by side, without trying to meld them into one, we can begin to appreciate the richness of incarnational theology – the theology of God coming to live among us as a human being.

First, through the birth of Jesus, the God who created the universe brings the entire world out of slavery to sin and death into the kingdom of heaven. As Paul says in his letter to Titus, “... the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all.”

Secondly, God is present in this tiny helpless baby. No longer is God present in a burning bush or in tablets of stone. God is embodied in flesh and blood. In Jesus, God does not just influence history. God enters into history.

Third, Jesus is the New David. Remember Matthew’s genealogy? When Jesus comes to rescue us from sin, he rescues us from all forms of oppression in life. It is through our faith in Jesus Christ that we are able to stand up to the King Herod’s of the world – stand up to all forms of evil – and denounce them.

Finally, Jesus is, as Isaiah says, the light of the world. Light is salvation. It is because of light that we are able to see the truth in the midst of the darkness of the human condition. In the light is true life; eternal life.

So much for incarnational theology. When it comes right down to it, the power of Christmas flows not so much from theology as from what it means to each of us personally and to all of us as a Christian community. Christmas is something that happens in our hearts. Christmas is the story of Christ being born in each of us through the union of the Spirit of God and our own flesh. The Christmas story is not just about an event that occurred two thousand years ago. It is about God’s birth in each of us today and tomorrow and the next day.

So for us as Christians, may every day be Christmas Day. May we respond to the birth of this helpless baby as the shepherds did, telling the story by the way we live our lives each day. As we bring this baby into our hearts, may we love one another as God loves us, this day and every day. Merry Christmas!

This sermon was preached by the Reverend Charles E. Connelly on Christmas Day, 2009, in Saint John’s Church, Tampa, Florida.