

BOOK OF FAITH EMPHASIS

New Series: "The Bible's Top 3 Christmas Stories" (Advent, 2009)

Week of Sunday, November 29: "Matthew's Christmas Story -- No Wonder It's Good News!"

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* * Reminder to Parents... Go to the First Lutheran website (www.firstlutheran.com), click on Children's Ministry, and click on the "Take It Home" icon, to read or download the weekly at-home material, including reading(s), prayer, discussion-starters and activities.

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BEFORE WE GET TO THE THREE STORIES IN MATTHEW, LUKE & JOHN...

+ Some Background... It is interesting and important to note that we have three Christmas stories, not one. They are more different than they are alike. And, it is also important to take note of where they are -- and are not -- found. Jesus lived from approximately 4 BCE (BC) to 30 CE (AD). The earliest New Testament writings are Paul's letters (epistles), dated approximately from 50 to 64 CE. The first gospel (a story about Jesus's mission and message) is Mark, dated approximately 70-75 CE.

+ Paul's writings (50-64 CE)... do not give any indication or information about Jesus having a miraculous birth. He says that Jesus was "born of a woman" like all human beings, and that he was "born under the law" like all Jewish people. Paul indicates that he knows James, the brother of Jesus, but he never mentions the names of Jesus' parents, nor shares any information about them.

+ Mark, The First Gospel Story (70-75 CE) ... is the first NT writing to introduce John the Baptizer, the first to say that Jesus performed miracles, and first to give a name for his mother, Mary. Mark never refers to a father figure at all. And Mark's story begins with Jesus as an adult. There are no details given about his birth at all, and no mention of any miraculous birth circumstances.

+ The Three Christmas Stories... are told according to Matthew (early 80's), Luke (late 80's), and John (mid to late 90's). When you compare Mark=>Matthew=>Luke=>John, you see the "big picture" story line of Jesus and his life/ministry evolve and develop more fully along with historical events and circumstances. The same is true for individual stories, like his birth, his crucifixion, and his resurrection. Some details of some stories are changed over time as well, usually based on some point the particular writer is trying to make.

+ Some Conclusions From This Information... For early Christians, (for about 40+ years after his life on earth ended) it seems that the stories of Jesus' birth were not crucial nor significant for their faithful following of his Way. The circumstances of his birth were unknown and/or considered unimportant. And as for our purposes in reading and using our Book of Faith, the Bible, we are less concerned with determining if these stories are "literal history" or "metaphor/parable", but more concerned about what they show and teach us about how to follow the Way of Jesus today. In other words, with their different stories of Jesus's "beginnings"... What were Matthew, Luke and John trying to convey to their communities, that will serve our community of faith and our following of Jesus today?

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READING FOR THE WEEK: MATTHEW Chapters 1 and 2

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SOME UNIQUE PARTS OF THE BIRTH STORY FROM MATTHEW...

+ Matthew depicts a bright, erratically-moving star that appeared around the time of Jesus' birth, and that guided gift-bearing Magi -- educated, holy, priestly, non-Jewish astrologers from Persia -- to his location in order that they might pay homage to the newborn King of the Jews. (Luke replaces the star with a host of angels, and replaces the Magi with shepherds)

+ There's no number given for the Magi, but they did bring three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

+ Matthew looks at the birth story from the father's perspective, whom Matthew names for the first time in the New Testament, as Joseph. An angel comes to Joseph in a dream. (Luke tells the story from the mother's perspective, and records that the angel Gabriel appears to Mary).

+ Matthew says that Jesus is born at home, in Bethlehem. (Luke says that Bethlehem is the birthplace because of a government census, mandating travel from the hometown of Nazareth. Luke also records the birth being where the animals are kept, because there was no room in the "guest room" or "upper room".)

+ Herod, when informed of the birth of Jesus, is upset, and later orders that all male children under 2 years old, under and around Bethlehem, must be killed.

+ Joseph, being warned in a dream by an angel, leaves with Mary and Jesus for Egypt, where they stay until Herod dies, then move to Nazareth in Galilee.

+ Matthew cites the prophet Isaiah, 7:14, stating that Jesus fulfills this prophecy of a future leader named "Emmanuel" and Matthew adds translation, "which means God is with us."

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WHAT -- AMONG OTHER THINGS -- MIGHT MATTHEW HAVE BEEN TRYING TO CONVEY WITH THESE ELEMENTS?

- + This Birth Story is a Prelude, an Overture, which introduces the common themes of the unfolding story of Jesus you are about to hear...
- + That the life, message and Way of Jesus have universal, cosmic implications.
- + That the life, message and Way of Jesus are at least as important as (and in competition with) Caesar's, and those of the other gods and prominent leaders of the ancient world. (Stories of virgin births, pregnancies attributed to God, and heavenly signs were not unique in Jesus' day, and were known to be told of other religious and political leaders preceding Jesus in history.)
- + That people way beyond Judea -- people of all kinds, races, cultures and ethnic varieties -- are included in the love and community of God's Kingdom Reign portrayed, taught and displayed by Jesus.
- + That leaders and systems based on domination of the many by the few -- like Herod's Jerusalem and Caesar's Roman Empire -- are threatened, and revealed for the lies that they are by the life, message and Way of Jesus.
- + That Jesus is connected to the God of, and God's Covenant with the Jewish people of the Hebrew Scriptures.
- + That Jesus "fit" in several ways -- though not all ways -- the expectations, hopes and predictions about a Jewish Messiah.
- + Gold is sign of wealth, royalty and prominence (even though Jesus was poor and powerless, and executed by the ruling authorities); Frankincense a sign of priesthood (even though Jesus was ostracized by the religious authorities); Myrrh was used for embalming the bodies of prominent, upper-class people (foreshadowing his death). In other words, the Magi represent those who saw the true power and God-given authority of Jesus' life, message and Way, while the true powers and authorities of his world were unable to see those realities (because of their authority, wealth and power?)

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STRIKING BOOKENDS TO MATTHEW'S JESUS STORY...

In Matthew's version of Jesus' birth, Matthew recalls Isaiah's claim that one known as Immanuel was coming, which means "God is with us." Near the end of Matthew's Jesus Story, his disciples are wondering what they will do without Jesus. Jesus tells a parable about the end of time, and tells his followers how to find and experience him, or God, after he dies. It is Matthew's clue about what Immanuel, "God is with us," looks like. (Read Matthew 25:31-40) Whenever we care for and give ourselves to the hungry, poor, thirsty, homeless, lonely, sick or imprisoned nobodies in the world, we are doing it to Jesus, we are doing it to God. Listen to or read the sermon from Sunday -- available on the website by Wednesday -- for a description of two prominent ideas in Jesus' day for where people thought God lived. Matthew's idea of "God With Us" and "the least of these" was RADICAL, to say the least.

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QUESTIONS FOR YOUR JOURNEY... AND A MOVIE RECOMMENDATION...

- + When and how have you experienced "Immanuel -- God With Us" in your life?
- + Can you relate some of your experiences to being on the "receiving end" and the "giving end" of Matthew 25:31-40?
- + In Jesus, Christians say that God was made manifest and lived a human life, in a human body, in a special and unique and powerful way. Today, the physical body of Jesus of Nazareth no longer exists on earth. But Paul referred to the community of Jesus Followers as "The Body of Christ." How are we continuing the Way of Jesus in our day? How is God using your body, our bodies, to impact people much like Jesus did in his day?
- + Both pastors recommend that you, your family and friends see the movie, "The Blind Side." See if you can count all the ways that God shows up... for, with and through Michael, the main character in the movie (based on a true, real-life story). How many expressions of "Immanuel -- God With Us" can you find in the movie?

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COMING NEXT WEEK... LUKE'S STORY ABOUT CHRISTMAS

Thanks for your partnership in our journey together,

Pastors Jay & Charlie