

Advent Theme: "The Bible's Top 3 Christmas Stories... According to Matthew, Luke and John"  
Week Beginning Sunday, December 6: "Luke's Christmas Story -- The Heart of a Loving Mother"

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READING FOR THE WEEK: LUKE Chapters 1 and 2

THOUGHTS ON THE READING: Luke portrays the birth of Jesus from the perspective of a mother, Mary. (Matthew was from the perspective of a father, Joseph.) Luke depicts angels and shepherds. (Matthew used a guiding star and Magi from the East). Luke portrays a shocking truth... that Jesus, not Caesar, is the world's Savior and Lord! Both of those terms were common titles referring to Caesar in Jesus' day, and Caesar demanded that citizens honor the meaning of those titles. There was a little leeway given to the Jews in Judah, which later, after Jesus, Rome lived to regret. Around 70 A.D. (C.E.) Rome did tighten the reigns by brutality and force, and Jerusalem was destroyed as a result. Luke goes to great lengths to connect the births, lives and messages of John the Baptizer and Jesus. While Matthew quoted the Hebrew Scriptures more than Luke, Luke apparently wants his readers to make the connection of John the Baptizer with the Old Testament message, and particularly as, perhaps, the last of the Hebrew prophets before the Messiah arrived.

Luke wants people to know, it seems, that Jesus will save us and lead us in a better Way than Caesar. Jesus is what a REAL "son of God" looks like, says Luke, rather than Caesar, who was known as "son of the gods" or "son of God" as well. So, Luke says that one who saves us for a life of meaning, purpose, peace and justice is a SERVANT king, not a DOMINATION king... a King who rules by love, compassion and forgiveness, rather than a King who rules by fear, force and violence... a King whose reign means GOOD NEWS FOR EVERYONE, WORLDWIDE, not just an exclusive, fortunate few. This Servant King shows us the Way of Life that God has always dreamed of for us. (Think back to our ventures through the Old Testament just several weeks ago.) And this God-kind-of-King Jesus, is born among the poor, with animals, in a backroads, podunk Bethlehem, of humble birth, while the royals feast and fume in Jerusalem and Rome. Jesus comes among us as a man of the common people, he is the antithesis of the power structure and royalty of his day -- both government and religion. He and his family hail from Nazareth of Galilee, even more of "no account" than Bethlehem of Judah. In Jesus, God is turning the world upside-down, which according to God, is right-side up!

Another interesting note... Shepherds were seen as outsiders in Jesus' day. They were sometimes regarded as scoundrels and/or low-lives who were not to be trusted. In fact, they spent most of their time roaming about and outside of the town walls. They were so suspect, that their testimony was not even accepted in courts of law. If a shepherd was your only witness in your defense against an accusation, you could count on being convicted. It would be better to have no one testify than to have a shepherd plead your case. Most people of any social regard or reputation did not want to be seen with shepherds.

CONNECTIONS WITH OUR JOURNEY TODAY...

+ Who are the "shepherds" in our world and our lives? How well are we including them in the good news of God that we are entrusted to share today?

+ Where and how do we experience the conflict between a posture of "Domination" and a posture of "Servant"? Where and how do we see leaders who try to influence others by fear, force and violence? Where and how do we see leaders who try to influence others by love, compassion and forgiveness? Why might Jesus, and Luke, want followers of Jesus to see the latter as the best, most effective, and only choice?

+ In Luke (further along than our reading this week) and in all the gospels, spend some time comparing the message of John the Baptizer to the message of Jesus. How were their primary teachings, and their views of God, salvation and life similar and different? While there are some similarities (Jesus, being baptized by John, was likely a disciple of John for some time before going on his own), there are also significant differences. How do we see these differences still playing out in Christianity and religion today?

+ Observe Mary's faith and heart. Luke really wants us to get in touch with our maternal instincts and feminine strengths in the way we follow Jesus, it seems. In 1:38, after God's messenger (the angel) asks Mary to do something that seems impossible, difficult and unbearable, Mary responds with a trusting heart, "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your (the angel's) word." Then, after Jesus is born, and after the shepherds visit the family talking about what they had been told, Luke tells us (2:19), "Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart." Some quick observations for our journey:

- (a) Mary took parenting and mentoring seriously, apparently, because Jesus would later make similar statements about trusting God completely, echoing Mary's faithful words in 1:38. We never know who we are influencing, powerfully, with our willingness to trust God and give ourselves fully to God's purposes.
- (b) Finding our God-given purpose(s) in life may involve difficulty, struggle, even suffering. It is likely not going to be an easy path to pursue. But there is incredible fulfillment and satisfaction, which provides life with meaning at the core of our being.
- (c) What does it mean to treasure God's Good News and ponder it in our heart? Luke seems to be hinting at and alluding to the necessity of spiritual practices or disciplines that will help us be more effective as God's vessels and companions in the world. Perhaps Luke is saying this: Taking time to think, ponder and pray reflectively, and meditating on God's good news in our lives, gives us fuel or energy to continue on the journey to which Jesus calls us.

THE NEXT TWO WEEKS: One of the next two Sundays, each of our morning worship services will experience Lessons & Carols. The other Sunday will be John's very different version of the Arrival of Jesus, John 1:1-18.

Blessings as we continue the Faith Trek together,

Pastors Jay & Charlie