

Christmas 1 Year: Year A
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We tell stories for a variety of reasons. Sometimes it is simply to entertain, sometimes to remember, sometimes to tell people what really happened, sometimes to convey a larger truth that cannot be conveyed by simply reciting the facts, and sometimes to obscure the truth, to confuse and mislead, and of course there are many other reasons as well. Because motivation is so important it is inevitably the case that if we do not know why people are telling the stories they tell we will misunderstand what their stories mean, and reach the wrong conclusions. If, for example, I tell you I did not eat the last of the Christmas cookies, it is important for you to know whether I have said this because I truly did not, or because I truly did. If you misunderstand my motivation, you will misunderstand my story about the cookies.

What is true of stories in general is also, and especially, true of the gospels, and more specifically the birth narratives of Jesus in Matthew and Luke. Most of us have been carefully trained from our youth to believe the motivation for these stories was to tell us what happened, much as a newspaper account might have, had there been such a thing two thousand years ago. Luke uses a rhetorical device at the very beginning of his gospel, assuring his friend “Theopholis” that he is doing exactly this. A lot of effort has been expended over the centuries not just to convey, but to reinforce this belief about the motivation of the Evangelists. Yet, despite all the efforts, this cannot be what they had in mind. Not only are the two stories quite different at the level of history - that is, of what happened - they are at times mutually contradictory.

Yet, those who compiled what became known as the New Testament had no compunction at all about putting these gospels side by side for all to see, without the slightest effort to reconcile the one account with the other. They understood the motivations of the Evangelists because they shared those motivations. In an era in which the truth was conveyed through story, song, poem, and there was no such thing as the study of history as a record of what actually happened, Matthew and Luke told the truth about Jesus in a manner that was completely consistent with the methods of their era, and they were remarkably convincing over time. Matthew strove to tell his Jewish audience that in Jesus the God of the Jews had been revealed as the God of all people, as the God of all creation. He was the fulfillment of the greatest hope of Israel. Luke - a Gentile - accepted this claim and emphasized that in Jesus, God shows that the realm of God is for all people, the least, the poorest, the despised and detested, not just those we know, like and accept. Not in marching armies do we see the presence of God, but rather in those the marching armies trample, that is where we see God.

Despite the discomfort created by realizing that what we were taught about their motivation is inaccurate, I believe it helps to know that Matthew and Luke were not writing history, not only because that genre of literature in its modern sense had not yet been invented, but because they had no history to research and write. They had only the presence of a community, risen to life by, in, and through Jesus' death, presenting to the very people who had killed him a message of love, mercy, compassion, redemption, inclusion. And the witness of that community convinced both of them of the truth of the claim that in Jesus God has met us, redeemed us, and changed the world. They did not believe because they had heard the stories about his birth, and wanted to share them. They wrote those stories because they were converted

by the presence of the community that lived in the spirit, the power, the love of Jesus who had been crucified. They wrote the stories to convey the truth of just who and what Jesus was. We need to understand that motivation in order to understand those stories.

And it will help to understand as well - at least it helps me, for whatever that is worth - that we today are not their intended audience. Both Matthew and Luke, along with many early Christians, Paul among them, believed that the fulfillment of history was very soon to come. The realm of God was about to be established so overtly, so obviously, so overwhelmingly that it would sweep away everything else in its path, and God's kind of justice would prevail henceforth and forever. These stories were not intended for an audience two thousand years later, an audience that lived in era in which truth had been so impoverished as to be confined to what could be mathematically demonstrated, historically verified, or experimentally repeated.

There is however one Evangelist who did intend to write for people yet unborn, and that is St. John. It is he, and he alone, who creates the story of the meeting with Thomas after the resurrection in which he declares: "You believe because you have seen me, blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe." That folks, is us, us and every generation of Christians before us who did not see Jesus, who did not know a single disciple, who never lived for even a second with the first generation of those who believed.

There is no birth story in John, only the assertion that summarizes the meaning of the birth stories: "the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth." Think for a moment about how it could be true, that "we" who live after he died, after the resurrection, after the very last of those who knew and loved him lived and died, could have seen this glory. How could we, living nearly two thousand

years later, see this glory? For as long as I have been studying John's gospel, I still can't speak with any confidence about his answer to that question. The best I can do is to say that when you realize that the presence of God is made known to us in the one who was despised, rejected and killed by people who were convinced they understood God and how God works perfectly, that's when you see the glory. John wrote this story, his whole gospel, in order to help those who came later to understand that truth, or something rather like it let me say, and so see that glory. That was his motivation, that was why he wrote it. We are his motivation.

The challenge of faith, therefore is not whether you can believe Jesus was born of a virgin. Some do, some don't, I don't. That challenge is not whether you can believe that angels heralded his birth, or wise men, or shepherds, or both, came to visit him. Some do, some don't, I don't. The challenge of faith is whether or not you can look at the one every powerful person who had a say believed was seditious or blasphemous, or both, and therefore killed him, and see in that person the presence of God among us, right here, right now. And that challenge is not confined to whether or not this is your opinion about the matter. That challenge is so broad that it is not engaged until it changes your whole life and perspective.

When we question whether God is more present in a policy that separates refugee children from their parents at the border, or is God more present in those children and their parents; then we are engaged in the challenge of faith. When we question whether God blessed the stalking and murder of Osama Bin Laden, as evil as that man was, then we are engaged in the challenge of faith. When we see a world in which God is present in the ones on whom the bombs are dropped, not in the ones who are dropping the bombs, then we are engaged in the challenge of faith. When we realize that both Barak Obama and Donald Trump are beloved

children of God, then we are engaged in the challenge of faith. When we seek and see the glory of God precisely in those places where both the people in charge and we ourselves claim it can't ever be seen, then we are engaged in the challenge of faith. I would say this as well, when we accept the tragic necessity from time to time of violence in this world, despite knowing in our heart of hearts that God has no enemies, then we are engaged in the challenge of faith.

John wrote that prologue to his gospel, and the rest of the gospel itself, in order to help us who live today to see that glory, as difficult and painful as it can be to witness it. For that is truth, the truth of the gospels, the truth of the tradition we have embraced, the truth that has embraced us, now in this Christmas season, and always.