

Advent: From Luke's Perspective

Luke 1:26-38, 2:1-24, 39-40
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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I've learned again recently that brainstorming sessions can lead to unforeseen challenges. As I mentioned a few weeks ago, early in November a few of us gathered to kick around the idea of doing something completely different here at the church during the season of Advent. The original idea, from the Rev. Cathy Elliot, that also included John Gammie and PJ Brobston, dealt with the desire to examine the unique voice of each of the four Gospel writers, focusing on their particular theological perspective in introducing the arrival – the advent – of Jesus. Following the order in which each gospel was written, it was suggested that each of the four Sundays in Advent examine one at a time.

Sounded like a great idea to me. It also sounded like a lot of extra sermon preparation work for the preacher. To make the proposal harder for me to refuse, at our brainstorming gathering John Gammie presented an already fully written liturgy for the lighting of the Advent Wreath. The theme of each week's candle reflected the perspective of one of the gospel writers. Needless to say, I was presented an offer I couldn't refuse.

So on the First Sunday of Advent, we took a look at the advent of Jesus from the perspective of the Gospel of **Mark**. But Mark, writing some time between 65-70 CE, doesn't include a story of Jesus' birth. Instead, he introduces Jesus as an adult at his baptism. Any narrative of Jesus' birth was evidently not important to Mark's overall perspective of Jesus' life and ministry. The result is that Mark presents us with a sense of urgency. This indicates that Jesus, and hence his followers – including us – have important work to do in the here and now.

Next, we explored **Matthew**, written some 10 years or so after Mark. He, along with Luke, used the Gospel of Mark as a primary resource for his own book. Matthew does include a birth narrative, beginning with a genealogy that connects Jesus with Israel's past history, including back to King David, and further to Abraham himself. Matthew's primary purpose in introducing Jesus in this way was to assure his primarily Jewish Christian community of faith that Jesus embodied the heart and soul of Israel. For Matthew, Jesus was the fulfillment of all those scriptural prophecies of a Messiah, which in Greek means Christ. And with numerous parallels to the story of Moses in the Book of Exodus, Matthew seeks to portray Jesus as a new and greater Moses – a new and greater lawgiver.

That brings us to the third gospel to be written, **Luke** – who was also the author of the Book of Acts. Luke wrote around the same time as Matthew, resourcing not only the Gospel of Mark but another work also used by Matthew that consisted of a catalogue of sayings of Jesus, which scholars call "Q".

For those of you who were here last Sunday, Cathy Elliot and I used the Time With the Children to visually portray the differences between Matthew's birth narrative and Luke's. As you know, the common church practice is to combine these two versions together in presenting a typical Christmas pageant. What we lose, however, is the distinct voice of each of these two gospel writers, for each had a very intentional

purpose for including and/or omitting certain characters and elements in his version of the story.

Here are some of the differences. Matthew has an unnamed angel announce Jesus's birth to Joseph in a dream. Luke has the angel Gabriel (a reference to the angel named in the prophetic book of Daniel) announce Jesus' birth to Mary while she was awake. Luke also has the familiar trip of Joseph and Mary from Nazareth to Bethlehem because of the census. It is while they were there that Jesus is born in a stable because there was no room at the inn. Matthew, however, has no such trip. The couple appears to already be living in Bethlehem. And apparently they lived in a house since we're told that the star leading the wise men stopped over a house, not a stable.

There are other differences. For instance, it is only Matthew that includes the guiding star and the wise men, the magi. And notice that he doesn't tell us how many there were, nor that they were kings. Like much of our understanding, that and more came from church traditions that developed over the centuries. It is also only Matthew that includes an evil plot by King Herod, which makes the Joseph and Mary flee to Egypt with Jesus to avoid Herod's slaughter of all the male children 2 years old and younger in Bethlehem. Matthew concludes his narrative with a journey out of Egypt back to Nazareth after the death of King Herod.

Luke, on the other hand, has no wise men, no evil plot by King Herod, no trip to and from Egypt in his story. Instead, after the birth of Jesus in the stable, a group of humble shepherds, after being told by an angel, visit Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus, who is lying in a manger, a trough used to feed animals.

Luke alone has an additional extensive story line in his birth narrative that includes an old priest named Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel announces to them that even in their old age they will give birth to a son, and he is to be named John, later becoming John the Baptist. Luke then has Mary visit Elizabeth, her relative. The story makes it clear that both Elizabeth and her baby, John, are subordinate to Mary and her baby, Jesus.

After Jesus' birth, Luke also includes a story of Jesus being presented to God in the Temple when he was 8 days old, followed by the family's return trip to Nazareth. And it is only in Luke where we have story of a young 12-year old Jesus and his parents visiting the Jerusalem Temple, where he is accidentally left behind.

Interestingly, it is only after the birth narrative is complete that Luke then offers his own genealogy of Jesus' lineage. The differences between his list and Matthew's are numerous and significant – but we don't have time to explore why this morning. Except to say, Luke doesn't stop his genealogy with Abraham, the father of the Hebrew faith, but goes all the way back to Adam.

Needless to say, there are enough important differences between Matthew's birth narrative account and Luke's to fill an entire course at seminary. And I realize that so far this sermon feels more like a book report than a typical sermon. Therefore, I wouldn't be surprised if many of you are wondering to yourself: **that's all very interesting and stuff, but what difference does it really make to us here and now?**

The answer to that has everything to do with how you understand and approach the Bible. If, for instance, you believe that every word written in the scriptures is actually a direct dictation from the mouth of God to the biblical authors, then no, it doesn't matter if stories differ, or even contradict – for all of them are God's words. If, on the other hand, you believe that each biblical author was writing about his own understanding of faith within a particular time and culture in history, then yes, each story and detail comes with the particular theological perspective of the author.

Several years ago, now, I stopped using the phrase, "This is the word of God," after I read a passage from the Bible before the sermon. This common statement gives many the impression that each word in scripture does indeed come from the mouth of God, not the biblical author. A strict understanding of this can be paraphrased in the bumper sticker, "God said it. I believe it. That settles it."

So the question posed to each and every believer in her or his own journey of faith is whether or not every word in the Bible came directly from God, or from the biblical author, albeit inspired by the Holy Spirit.

You know how I answer that question. That's why for several years now I end the reading of the scripture with the phrase, "May God bless the reading and the hearing of this word." There's a big difference. **For me, the Word of God is not the words printed in a holy book. Rather, the Word is the living Presence of God in our midst, as pointed to and expressed through the life, ministry and teachings of Jesus of Nazareth**, whose birth we will celebrate in just a few days. And that's why progressive Christianity takes the Bible very seriously, but not (in most instances) literally. Yet, we still believe that **the scriptures can be used by the Holy Spirit to speak to us in powerful and transformative ways.**

So instead of getting caught up in arguments of whether or not these stories are literal history, we get down to the nitty gritty of trying to understand why each of these four gospel writers, for example, wrote what they wrote and why. Then we explore what they may be saying to us today. In this way, **the Bible itself does not become our focus of worship, which would make it an idol. Rather, it is an instrument that reveals and points to the living God whom rightfully deserves our worship.**

In the context, then, of this morning's Gospel reading, the question becomes: What kind of God is pointed to in Luke's birth narrative of Jesus? The answer to that deserves another full sermon. But I think it's wonderfully summarized in the liturgy John Gammie wrote for the lighting of the Advent Wreath candle of Joy.

As we light the candle of Joy, we remember the voice of the writer of the Third Gospel, whom we call Luke.

In Luke's birth narrative we recall the astonishing "good tidings of great joy" are found in the birth of a child, witnessed by humble shepherds, not kings or wise men, and without a special star.

In Luke it is the unwed peasant girl, Mary, not her husband to be, who receives the good news.

As we celebrate the joy of Advent, Luke's voice reminds us God's good news is for everyone, not just the powerful, not just those of the "right" religion - and that fundamentally God works and is present in ways and places we least expect.

God's work in the world, and hence ours, must indeed focus on the least and the lowly among us. This, in part, is where we can find joy. "And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." - Luke 2:12

For those of you who won't be able to join us on Christmas Eve, have a blessed and joyous Christmas.

Amen.