

Luke 2:1-20  
Christmas Eve  
Dec 24, 2014  
Sooooo Many Questions

In this morning's cartoon strip *Baby Blues*, the father reads "The Night before Christmas" to his three little ones. When he finishes, one of the children says, "*I have sooooo many questions about that story.*"

Luke's Gospel narrative of the birth of Jesus is a well-know religious story. It is "the Christmas Gospel" even in the secular world, and in the hearts of those who, for whatever reason, feel separated from or abandoned by God. Yet, we have sooooo many questions about that story.

The Gospels according to Luke and Matthew were written down within two generations of the crucifixion, somewhere between 70 and 90 C.E.. Some would say that the Christ's birth story has been with us from the beginning, foretold by the prophets of the Old Testament.

It's an old story. We tend to become complacent, hearing it year after year. We slide comfortably into the message of peace on earth, without first experiencing the startling announcement of God's incarnate presence among us.

The shepherds set out for Bethlehem because they want to see this Savior, the Messiah. The wise men came to Jerusalem, looking for the child, but the priests and scribes did not set out to see for themselves. They were satisfied with their own religiosity, and had no real interest in knowing the Savior. I wonder, do we become like them when we hear the familiar story but fail to act, to ponder the story anew?

Asking questions causes us to think more deeply, to change direction, realign priorities, become more attentive and attuned to the presence of God in our lives.

I have sooooo many questions about the Christmas story.

Since she was three, my grand daughter Grace(who is now eight) has carefully placed the camel on *top* of the stable roof of their wood creche – the camel keeps watch for the season. Grace captures a question about Luke's birth narrative – was the babe born in a stable (as we assume in our creche scenes), or in a cave where animals took shelter? There are many caves around Bethlehem; the animals wander around on the grassy, rocky terrain on top of the caves, and are brought inside for safety at night.

As a young child, I wondered why the shepherds left their flocks unattended; what happened to their animals while they were gone? What kind of irresponsible adults were these shepherds? I wondered where the doctor and nurses were, I worried about the baby lying in a dirty manger. In the children's Christmas pageant, I imagined myself as part of the Christ story, making my way

to Bethlehem, but there were parts I really wanted to change – to make it *safer* to be the Holy family and the Christ child.

As I got older, new questions arose. The birth city's ancient name Beth-*Lahum* – meant the house or sanctuary city of Lahum. Lahum was the god of war of the Canaanites. The city's name was changed, several centuries *before* the birth of Jesus. Beth-*lahum* became Beth-*lehem*. *Lehem* means bread, and Beth-*lehem* means house or city of bread. Interesting, isn't it? Jesus, born in Bethlehem, brought a message of peace, he was not the warrior militant Messiah the Hebrews anticipated. Two thousand years later, we call Jesus the bread from heaven.

Why don't the historical dates of the great census match up with the year we call the first year after the birth of Christ, *anno domini* or the beginning of the Christian Era? What about the virgin birth, and the convoluted tracing of the family geneology back to the House of David?

Questions abound, mostly about how the facts work out – or don't, scientifically or historically. Questions are how we humans approach God.

But – Jesus' birth is about *God approaching humanity*, not the other way around. Always, there remains mystery, something we can't explain or hold in our grasp.

Why wasn't there room at the inn – do people now have time or room for Jesus Christ? During the holiday season it appears we have less time for Him than at any other time of the year. Suicide and depression, emotional break downs, are more prevalent. We focus on material possessions, pleasure and good times. Where is the room for peace which the Christmas story promises?

A young friend recently asked, 'why does Jesus get born over again every year?' In the shadow of recent world events, a religious commentator asks whether we are naive to keep talking about, praying and hoping for peace.

My young friend understands that Christmas is not just a birth-day celebration. It is a once-again, new event. New birth – new creation– means that peace is always possible, even close at hand. Something new is taking shape, with unique and awesome possibilities. Hope grows within us, unexpectedly. We are not naive to welcome the presence of God and pray for peace.

Jim Wallis, writing today in *Sojourners*, says,

Hope is not a feeling, it is a decision – a choice you make based on what we call faith or moral conscience, whatever most deeply motivates you.... Even in the midst of terrible events and stories, the possibilities of hope still exist, depending on what we decide to do for reasons of faith and conscience. In fact, people of faith and conscience are already making a difference in the most difficult situations and places.... Christmas hope believes the world can and will change.

The Christ was not born into ‘the perfect family’, but to an unmarried young woman. The holy family was not even at home: the babe was in an animal’s manger, the mother exhausted by labor, the father trying to figure out what to do next.

Christ’s humanity takes many forms: the person next to you in the pew; the homeless sleeping in the park or in a tent city; the children making their way illegally across the border or fearing their parents will be swept up and sent back; the people who express their frustration in legal and political processes by demonstrations that deteriorate into violence and destruction; the police officers charged with protecting the safety of others and fearing for their own safety; the young black male who by reason of his skin color is stereotyped as a person to be feared.

These are people among whom the Christ is born anew each year – in places where violence begets more violence, where retaliation escalates conflict. The light of Christ illuminates what the world could be, where the system needs to be changed. And God uses our hands to accomplish God’s purposes.

God comes to us as a baby, blessedly incapable of violence or retribution, dependent on our hands to accomplish God’s purposes. A child requires something of us – nurturing, caring for, holding in our hearts with love, emotional and verbal connection. We initiate playful exchanges of peek-a-boo, and rejoice when we are rewarded with smiles and giggles. Love is unconditional. The consuming passion of the infant /adult relationship embraces our two-way relationship with God. The Christ child demands of us, *Look at me, talk to me, laugh with me, be connected:* nurture your relationship with God.

The first week in December, there was break-in at St. Paul’s Episcopal church in Bellingham. Vandals entered the basement, removing about \$40 of copper pipe which connected the water heater – flooding the basement and making the kitchen above inoperable. The day following the break-in was Tuesday, when the people of St. Paul’s serve a meal to the homeless; the meal was cancelled. A few days later, a man walked into the church office, and handed the secretary a bank envelope containing ten \$100 bills. He was a veteran, he said, and appreciated the ministry of the church to the homeless. One week later, another man came in and left a check for \$1,000, which he said was money collected by the homeless community to help repair the church. Christ’s humanity takes many forms.

Visiting Bethlehem earlier this year, I went down into the cave system which is celebrated as the birth place of Christ. There are many hollows, like small rooms. In one area, sitting huddled on a ledge, was a woman in Muslim garb. She had a toddler strapped on her back, and was leaning forward, her upper body resting on her knees, her eyes closed. The toddler was sound asleep. The two were motionless, their peace and quiet palpable. No one disturbed her or asked her to leave. Here was a vision of what the world could be – a Muslim woman and her child finding peace in the shelter of Christ’s birth.

The shepherds were outsiders, disenfranchised, living in the fields and caves. Their work kept

them from observing the sabbath; they were considered ritually unclean. Some towns had ordinances barring shepherds inside their city limits. Shepherds were stereotyped as ‘sinners’ because of their vocation, like tax collectors and prostitutes.

These are the people to whom the angel announces God’s incarnation. The good news is that Jesus is born among the people who most need him. God comes into the world to change it.

Do you know someone who feels separated from God, perhaps so injured by loss or pain that worship is unthinkable? God goes where God is needed.

The Christ child is born to all, that all may hear the message ‘do not be afraid,’ do not live your life in fear.

The Scripture says *Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.*

Year after year, we ponder the Gospel story. Like the shepherds, we glorify and praise God for all we have heard and seen, as it has been told to us. Christ is born anew in our decision to hope, and to know and love God.

*Amen*

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