

DECEMBER 23, 2012: FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Micah 5:1-4a Hebrews 10:5-10 Luke 1:39-45

Was Jesus of Nazareth actually born in Bethlehem? Or is that just a theological way for Matthew and Luke to convey their belief that he was the Messiah?

Although a majority of Scripture scholars still believe in the geographical accuracy of the gospel accounts, a significant minority question that part of the infancy narratives. Even a cursory reading of Matthew and Luke's narratives surfaces significant contradictions. Though both evangelists agree that Jesus was born in David's hometown, each has a different way to get Mary and Joseph to the town for the blessed event. Matthew presumes the pair already live there. (He then must find a way to eventually get them up to Nazareth.) Luke, on the other hand, creates a Roman census to move this newly married couple from their home in Nazareth down to Bethlehem.

No one familiar with Jewish history can deny that the evangelists' focus on Bethlehem was rooted in their belief that Jesus was the Messiah whom their fellow Jews had been expecting for centuries. Because the original concept of Messiah revolved around Jewish kings - all descendants of David - the earliest biblical references to Messiah frequently mentioned Bethlehem, as we hear in today's Micah reading. "You, Bethlehem-Ephrata, too small to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel; whose origin is from of old, from ancient times." In other words, we're waiting for a special descendant of David to arrive, someone who will return us to those glory days of old.

No wonder Jesus' first followers presume that, if he were the Davidic Messiah, he, like his ancestor, would have to be born in Bethlehem.

Yet those same followers also were convinced that Jesus of Nazareth offered much more than the vast majority of first century CE Jews expected of their Messiah; among other things, as the author of our Hebrews passage mentions, he set up a new way of worshiping God. "In holocausts and sin offerings you (God) took no delight. . . . These are offered according to the law. Then he (Jesus) says, 'Behold, I come to do your will.' he takes away the first to establish the second." Jesus is a Messiah who taught that doing God's will was more fulfilling and righteous than carrying out all the minutiae of liturgical regulations. No one seemed to be expecting that kind of a savior.

Luke believes that those who follow such a unique Messiah have one basic task: to hear God's word and carry it out. He focuses on Jesus' mother as the person who constantly fulfills that responsibility. Notice that whenever Mary appears in Luke's gospel, there's always something mentioned about her fulfilling God's word. For instance, in the annunciation, she responds, "Let it be done to me according to your word." And when someone from the crowd later yells out to Jesus, "Blessed is the womb that bore you and the breasts that nursed you!" he yells back, "Blessed rather are those who hear God's word and carry it out!"

In today's pericope, Elizabeth is given the honor of mentioning Mary's special "messianic" characteristic. "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled."

In some sense, it doesn't matter where Jesus was born. Because his earliest followers believed he was the Messiah, Bethlehem certainly had to come into the picture. But whether it was Bethlehem or Nazareth, it was essential for them to imitate those parts of his personality which were really messianic. Perhaps the big question today is how do we surface the word of God which contains God's will?

Roger Vermalen Karban

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DECEMBER 25, 2012: CHRISTMAS

(Eucharist at Midnight) Isaiah 9:1-6

Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14

As we listen to this morning's first and second readings we're reminded that no Christian feast "eisegetes" Scripture more than Christmas. Passages which originally had one meaning are twisted around and given an interpretation which their original authors never intended.

When Isaiah, for instance, proclaims, "A child is born to us, a son is given us; upon his shoulder dominion rests!" he's not talking about Jesus, he's commenting on the birth of the future king Hezekiah. During this period - around 740 BCE - kings in Judah weren't noted for their devotion to Yahweh and Yahweh's will. The prophet hopes for a turnabout in Hezekiah's birth; a reversal of his father Aha's policies. No wonder he gives him such fantastic honorary titles: "Wonder-Counselor, God-Hero, Father-Forever, Prince of Peace." Though these might be traditional ways of referring to a Jewish king, Isaiah is convinced that this time, with Hezekiah on the throne, they'll have real meaning.

In the same vein, the unknown author of the letter to Titus isn't talking about Jesus' birth in Bethlehem when he writes about awaiting "... the blessed hope, the appearance of the glory of our great God and savior Jesus Christ.... " He could only be referring to the risen Jesus' second coming: the Parousia. After 2,000 years, that event has yet to happen in the way the earliest followers of Jesus anticipated.

Except for the actual gospel accounts of Jesus' birth, it's hard to pick preliminary readings for this feast. There are no passages in the Hebrew Scriptures which originally were intended to predict Jesus as we know him, nor did Paul and his disciples focus on his birth. In some sense, Jesus' arrival and ministry as Messiah is a surprise, even to faithful Jews.

Actually the infancy narratives were the last part of the gospels to take shape. The passion/resurrection narratives were the first. It's only after understanding the latter than the former make any sense. Though those of you who are married can probably tell me about the first time you met your eventual significant other, I presume you can't go into similar detail about every other person you've met during your lifetime. This particular meeting is important only because of what happened later, not because of what actually transpired in the original encounter. It's the same with Jesus' birth. Unless he one day dies and rises, his birth is insignificant. But once he does die and rise, the narrative of his birth is colored by the evangelists' faith in that later event.

Luke for instance, believes it's important to make Jesus' birth in Bethlehem the result of a decree from Caesar Augustus. One of the reasons he writes his gospel and the Acts of the Apostles is to encourage his readers to have no fear of the Roman Empire - and the Roman Empire to have no fear of Christianity. Though his hopes will eventually be dashed by later persecutions, at this point he believes civil history can play a role in God's "salvation history." They're not always two opposing forces.

Perhaps this morning we can best understand the unexpectedness of Jesus' arrival by first experiencing the dying and rising which his original followers experienced. Only after we give ourselves for others, as he did, will the unexpected become the norm. Who knows in what "normal" events of life we'll discover the risen Jesus. He/she might even be present in people we've known for a lifetime, yet never really looked before with the eyes of faith. If we're just experiencing the expected today, something isn't right.

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