

DECEMBER 25, 2014: CHRISTMAS
EUCCHARIST AT MIDNIGHT
Isaiah 9:1-6 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14

A biblically sophisticated friend always constructs two separate nativity scenes under her Christmas tree. One is a stable, complete with shepherds, animals and an angel hovering above a child lying majestically in a feed trough. His parents kneel reverently on each side of the manger.

The other depicts a modest home with a large picture window through which one can see a small child resting peacefully in a cradle. Above the house is a star, guiding three astrologers who are making their way down a city street.

She creates these two scenes because she knows there are two separate - at times contradictory - gospel narratives of Jesus' birth. Most of us know about this blessed event not from Matthew and Luke's gospel accounts but from our grade school or P.S.R. Christmas pageants. Those who created these productions simply interwove both stories, left out the contradictions and gave us the impression that there's just one gospel account.

But, for instance, reading just Matthew's account of the birth, we immediately notice there's no census, no trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem, no inn, no stable, no shepherds, no angelic messengers. The couple seems already to be living in David's birth city. It's there, some years later, that some star-following magi find them, triggering Herod's slaughter of the innocents, and after a sojourn in Egypt, eventually leading them to settle in Nazareth.

Scholars today are convinced that Matthew never read Luke's gospel; and Luke never read Matthew's. They employ two different traditions in creating their Infancy Narratives, each trying to convey his unique theology about the significance of Jesus of Nazareth.

Luke, writing for Gentile Christians, believes it's important to situate Jesus in the Roman-dominated world in which his readers live. That seems to be why he begins his narrative with a "decree (which) went out from Caesar Augustus." His Jesus will also become a part of that world, eventually having to relate to the same empire to which they related.

But it's also clear that Jesus will attract people to his message who are on the fringes of that world. Shepherds in the first century CE weren't the romanticized individuals we've made them today. Families normally locked up their daughters when shepherds came to town; and judges were cautioned not to believe them when they testified in court. Yet they're the people to whom the angels come; the chosen individuals who show up at the stable on that most important night; those walking in darkness who first experience Isaiah's "great light;" the first to receive the "abundant joy" God wishes for all people.

Lucan scholars point to the "journey narratives" in both his gospel and Acts of the Apostles. His significant people are always "on the road," demonstrating his belief that Jesus' followers are always on a journey of faith, always discovering new dimensions of their faith, always surfacing new ways in which that faith is to be lived. He's convinced that journey begins while we, like Jesus, are still in our mothers' wombs.

But before we read their Scriptures our sacred authors presume we already have faith in Jesus' dying and rising. They write to share their insights into that experience. It, for instance, took years of reflecting on what happens when someone imitates that two stage event before the disciple of Paul responsible for the letter to Titus could talk about the "the grace of God (which) has appeared to all."

Each follower of Jesus eventually surfaces unique implications of his or her faith.

Perhaps we need three, not two nativity scenes under our Christmas tree. I presume through the years, each of us has also developed a unique theology about the importance of Jesus in our lives, a theology we can read back into his infancy.

DECEMBER 28, 2014: HOLY FAMILY
Sirach 3:2-7, 12-14 Colossians 3:12-21 Luke 2:22-40

What makes families unique is that while each member is constantly relating to other members, they themselves are constantly changing. Whoever tries to understand families is working with moving targets. This applies also to the Holy Family.

If the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is correct when he remarks that Jesus was a human being like all of us except in sin, I presume his relationship with his family was also like ours except in sin. Scholars are convinced for a long time that the gospel annunciations to Mary and Joseph are simply literary devices employed by the evangelists to help us, the readers, understand the implications of the events they're narrating. That has some disturbing implications. Historically Joseph and Mary would have had no special revelation concerning their son or their own relationship. What Matthew's angel tells the sleeping Joseph, and Luke's Gabriel reveals to Mary wouldn't have been known to them until after Jesus' death and resurrection. Only then did they begin to understand what the two evangelists, writing generations later, not only took for granted but also integrated into their angelic annunciations.

Mark, whose gospel contains no annunciations to Mary or Joseph, actually mentions in chapter 3 that at one point Jesus' mother, along with other family members – including his “brothers” - tried to “seize him, for they said, ‘He is out of his mind.’” I presume such a good intentioned action must have led to some interesting conversations between mother and son. How do you relate to family whom you believe is possessed by a demon?

Like all families, Joseph, Mary and Jesus lived within the restrictions which bind all of us.. As good Jews, for instance, they fulfilled their religious obligations, as we hear in today's gospel pericope. And as ordinary human beings, they were expected to develop ways of dealing with one another. As the Pauline disciple who wrote the letter to the Colossians taught, they had to show one another “heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” And according to the customs of her day and age, Mary was expected to be “subordinate to her husband.”

This concern for good family relations biblically goes back hundreds of years before the appearance of the Holy Family. Sirach in our first reading wants to make certain his readers reflect on the fulfilling life these relations offer. Of course, as times change, the relationship changes. Notice how the author even talks to a child whose father is in the throes of dementia. “Even if his mind fails, be considerate of him: revile him not all the days of his life; kindness to a father will not be forgotten”

But perhaps the most important aspect of good family relations is the ability to see something in one another which goes beyond one's natural vision. Simeon is given this role in our Jerusalem temple passage.

It's possible that this elderly man took each child he encountered in the temple in his arms and said some of the same or similar words over him or her that are quoted in today's liturgical selection. He was convinced every child had the potential of bringing Yahweh's salvation to others. But if one specific child actually carried through on that gift of God, his or her mother had to be warned that a “sword would pierce her” – a biblical idiom for having to make a decision one would rather not make.

I often wonder if Joseph and Mary, like all parents, were really prepared for the decisions they'd have to make about their son. It takes a lot of faith in one another to eventually become a good family. I can only imagine the faith it takes to become a Holy Family.