

DECEMBER 25TH, 2016: CHRISTMAS

Eucharist at Midnight

Isaiah 9:1-6 Titus 2:11-14 Luke 2:1-14

Have you ever noticed the contradictions in the two gospel narratives of Jesus' birth? Perhaps one of the most significant disagreements revolves around where Joseph and Mary lived before their son's birth.

In today's Lucan pericope, they originally reside in Nazareth and temporarily end up in Bethlehem because of a return-to-hometown-census decreed by Caesar Augustus – an improbable census which no historian has yet been able to track down. After a short stay in David's city, the three return to Nazareth where Jesus spends his childhood.

In Matthew, on the other hand, Joseph and Mary already live in Bethlehem. Their roundabout path to Nazareth is triggered by King Herod's slaughter of children in an attempt to kill the Messiah – an atrocious action which even National Geographic claimed several years ago most probably didn't happen. The Holy Family first flees to Egypt, then, instead of returning to Bethlehem, eventually decide to settle in Nazareth.

We've traditionally gotten around these contradictions by combining the two narratives into a third account which we use for our school Christmas plays and display in the crib sets under our Christmas trees. Since we're so unfamiliar with Scripture almost no one notices this crime against divine inspiration. (I trust over the centuries that God has mercifully been shielding Matthew and Luke in heaven from this atrocity.)

Having heard these gospel birth stories all our lives, most of us believe we're listening to historical, accurate accounts of this important event, yet we're actually coming into contact with each evangelist's unique theology, not unbiased history. If we only had one gospel, we might be excused if we think we're listening to history. Thankfully we have two narrating the circumstances of Jesus' birth. The contradictions are one proof we're dealing with theology, not history. It's one thing to see something happen; quite another to understand the meaning of what happened. Theology's main goal is to convey meaning. That's why we almost always find contradictions in biblical theology. There's always more than one set of implications for any given event.

Like most Christians of his day and age, Luke was theologically convinced Isaiah was speaking about Jesus as Messiah when in today's first reading he proclaimed the Messiah's Prince of Peace "dominion" over all people. No wonder Luke calls upon angels to announce "peace to those on whom (God's) favor rests." If you've experienced such peace in your following of Jesus, then you theologically insert something about that peace in your birth narrative.

The unknown author of the letter to Titus does something similar in our second reading. Because he theologically interprets Jesus' death and resurrection as a cleansing of ourselves from "lawlessness," he encourages his readers to "reject godless ways and worldly desires," until the day when the risen Jesus returns in glory. It's important to note that as meaningful as this theology is for many Christians, it significantly differs from Luke's theology of the same event.

Perhaps one way to avoid the "schmaltz" accompanying our modern celebrations of Christmas would be to create our own theology of Jesus' birth. Imitating Matthew and Luke, we shouldn't start our theologizing with Bethlehem and Nazareth, angels and shepherds, but with our own personal, unique experience of the risen Jesus in our daily lives. With what would we compare that experience? Is there anything we've read or seen that would help others know what happens when we daily imitate Jesus? Or even better, would help ourselves more deeply understand that experience?

Jesus' birth not only had meaning for people 2,000 years ago, it should also have meaning for us today. If on this special day we don't explore that significance in our own lives, we're simply freeloading on other peoples' experiences.

JANUARY 1ST, 2017: SOLEMNITY OF MARY
Numbers 6:22-27 Galatians 4:4-7 Luke 2:16-21

We actually know very little about the mother of Jesus of Nazareth. Except for Luke, the evangelists didn't write much about her, and the earliest Christian author, Paul, only refers to her in passing, as he does in today's Galatians passage: ". . . God sent his Son, born of a *woman* . . ." Though many of us Catholics don't like to admit it, the first gospel writer, Mark, tells us in chapter 3 that Mary was one of Jesus' family members who one day "came to seize him" because they thought he was "out of his mind." If we only had Mark's gospel, I don't think we'd have many churches named "St. Mary's."

In some sense, it isn't important to know what the evangelists tell us about her historically as it is to surface how they use her – how they have her react to her son and his message. No one uses her better than Luke. Throughout his gospel, she's Jesus' perfect disciple. And Luke has a simple definition of that special person: he or she is someone who first listens to God's word and then carries it out.

Most of us are familiar with John Williams' well-known score for the movie *Jaws*, especially the two-note ostinato which warns of the shark's appearance. When we hear it, we know something bad's about to happen. In a parallel, but totally different way, whenever Mary appears in Luke's gospel, he plays her theme song, almost always mentioning something about hearing God's word and/or carrying it out. The classic place is in 11:27-28. "While he was speaking, a woman from the crowd called out and said to him, 'Blessed is the womb that carried you and the breasts at which you nursed.' He replied, 'Rather blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it.'" If Mary's a significant figure for Luke, it's not because she's Jesus' mother, but because she best carries out her son's command to listen and act.

The evangelist's emphasis on Mary as Jesus' perfect follower also seems to be behind his remark in our gospel pericope that, "Mary kept all these things, reflecting on them in her heart." Before acting, other Christs must do a lot of reflecting simply to know exactly what God wants them to do.

Yet we can never forget that the historic Mary heard and carried out God's word as a 1st century BCE Palestinian Jew, not the European, blue-eyed Gentile young woman we're familiar seeing in our modern pictures and statues of her. Paul reminds his Galatian community that Jesus was "born under the law." Luke likewise reminds his Gentile community about one of the practical implications of keeping that law: "When eight days were completed for his circumcision, he was named Jesus, the name given him by the angel . . ."

Mary didn't hear God's word in a church, during a celebration of the Eucharist, or while listening to one of the gospels. She heard that word in a synagogue, reciting her Sabbath meal prayers, or while listening to the Hebrew Scriptures. God's word in that Jewish context eventually led her son, herself, and people like Paul to go beyond the limits of that historical context and discover Yahweh present and working in all people, not just Jews.

Perhaps January 1st is the best day to hear the famous blessing of Aaron. Though originally a Jewish fertility blessing, its words have evolved into sentiments all people of God share. Jesus' mother must have frequently employed it. May we, like Mary, not only hear these thoughts about peace, but during this year actually commit ourselves to doing what's necessary to make that peace a reality.