

This morning I'd like for you all to sit back, relax and take a deep breath. We've all had a rather hectic Christmas season. So I'm inviting you all to join me on a no stress journey through scripture. Open your mind and come along with me to take a fresh look at the story of Jesus's birth from Luke's gospel. On this journey, we'll consider this story from the perspective of the writer of Luke's gospel as opposed to the perspective of the characters in it. The gospel text this morning is part of the text that we heard at the late service on Christmas Eve and again on Christmas day. We saw this scene portrayed in our Christmas Eve pageants, complete with animals and a live baby Jesus. You'll recall that in the story, shepherds who were watching their flocks by night were told by angels of Jesus' birth. As instructed, they traveled into town and found the holy child wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger.

The person who wrote Luke's gospel was not himself an eyewitness to all this. In fact, this gospel account was written more than fifty years after Jesus's crucifixion. The author could not research the story by looking up newspaper accounts of Jesus's birth. There were no photographs on file. He likely had access to Mark's gospel but there is no birth story there. He was writing about the same time that Matthew's gospel was written so they may have shared a resource that contained some information. But it is important to know that at the time their gospels were written, Matthew's and Luke's audiences demanded and deserved to know where the man they knew as Jesus came from. They wanted and needed to know why his life should matter in terms of their salvation and so do we. As was the custom of the time, the people would have expected to be told or to read about his birth story.

By the time Luke was writing, Jesus had been long gone. The memory of him was very much alive though. There was much talk and controversy over who exactly Jesus was and how and from whom he derived the power to do all that he had done. There were some who were saying that Jesus was divine, surely sent from God, but that he only appeared to be human; they thought Jesus was some sort of ethereal being but not human. But based on eyewitness accounts and the guidance of a couple of generations of ministers, Luke knew that Jesus was indeed fully human. As you can read in the prologue of his gospel, Luke decided to write an “orderly account” (Luke 1:3) to provide assurance to people who believed Jesus was Christ, their Savior. Luke’s goal was to assure Gentiles that they were indeed part of the people of God’s promise. Luke was convinced that assurance of their faith could be affirmed by providing a greater sense of Jesus’s identity and a greater sense of God’s fidelity to God’s people.

In our everyday lives, don’t we look for that kind of affirmation and assurance, too? Don’t we seek to know all that we possibly can before we trust that something is true; that a person is reliable? When there are gaps in our knowledge of something or someone we look for reliable sources to fill them. Right? These days, we have to consider the possibility that our source of information might be “fake news.” We have to go to some length to be sure our source is accurate. It seems we have an insatiable need for facts.

Ancient readers were not so dependent on factual accuracy. They relied upon people who had honorable reputations, who were known to be trusted. They relied upon a story’s consistency with tradition. They were trained in the use of metaphor and allegory. They were accustomed to nuance in language. They used these tools to

discern the overall “truth” of a subject. So for contemporary readers, like us, to properly interpret these ancient texts, some links to Hebrew tradition and Old Testament scripture must be made.

It is important to realize that Luke was written within a cultural context of expectation; of Israel’s expectation that God intended to fulfill God’s promise of salvation for God’s people. Luke’s nativity story provides a bridge, a segue (if you will) between the promise revealed through the stories of Abraham, Moses and the prophets and the surprising, startling and notable gift of Jesus’s life **in** and ministry **to** Israel. Was Jesus indeed the fulfillment of God’s promise? Was this newborn child the Messiah?

Luke describes Jesus’ birth in two verses. But there are six verses describing the angels’ announcement of the birth to the shepherds. The emphasis on shepherds would have been apparent to the first hearers. Shepherds’ fields surround the town of Bethlehem which located just south of Jerusalem but notably outside of the city. It is a town that sits on the margins of society, like our housing projects. Bethlehem is known as The City of David, the king of Israel, who was notably a shepherd before he ascended to the throne. That the newborn child was wrapped in swaddling clothes would have led hearers to understand that Jesus’s parents were thoroughly embedded in local culture and tradition. That he was placed in a manger would have alerted the reader to the impoverished surroundings in which he was born. This was a child who was clearly not born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

But the important thing is that he **was** born. He was *fully human*. It was shepherds, not chief priests or kings but average Joes, who were called to witness to his birth. In fact, they were less-than-average Joes. Shepherds were the lowest of the

low and Jesus was born into their midst. It was to the lowest of the low who would receive Jesus's message of salvation. Jesus would grow up to expand the definition of God's people beyond the bounds of Israel. He would invite the leaders of Judaism to reinterpret who was in and who was out.

Today, the gospel reading picks up a verse which was omitted last week. Last week we ended the reading with the shepherds glorifying and praising God. after they saw the baby Jesus. The additional verse that we heard this morning (Luke 2:21) reads: After eight days had passed, it was time to circumcise the child; and he was called Jesus, the name given by the angel before he was conceived in the womb.

It makes sense that this verse was added to the lectionary this morning, doesn't it? A full week has passed since Christmas, so it matches with our own sense of time. We know it is the Hebrew tradition to circumcise infant boys eight days after their birth. The addition of that verse identifies Jesus as thoroughly and completely Jewish as well as thoroughly and completely human. We know that humans experience pain and there is bleeding with circumcision. This verse is a firm counter to those who would deny Jesus's humanity. Jesus, the man, would grow up to know pain of all types, emotional and physical. He would grow up to be tortured and then crucified by the Roman Empire, shedding his blood because of the truth about God that his life revealed.

Jesus did not grow up the way the first century culture would prescribe for any other Jewish boy pursuing a priestly ministry. Had he followed the prescribed route he would likely have become a chief Sadducee or Pharisee priest. But Jesus was not like any other Jewish boy. While others may have followed their fathers' vocations, Jesus followed his *true* father's vocation, God's vocation. Jesus revealed to those with whom he lived, ate, taught and prayed that God wants very much to be in relationship with us; *all* of us. The driving magnetic force that draws us all into that relationship is love; not romantic love but agape¹ love: universal, unconditional love that transcends worldly desires.

Jesus revealed God's unrelenting, compassionate, hospitable, justice bound love to the world. Catholic priest, scholar and theologian Richard Rohr says this, "Love is the lesson, and God's love is so great that God will finally teach it to all of us. We'll finally surrender, and God will win in the end."²

My friends, in this new year, we are called to continue to participate in Jesus's work; to continue to reveal God's love in the world one day, one person and one loving step at a time. Please join me in responding to that call.

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agape>

² https://cac.org/universal-restoration-2016-12-30/?utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=2016-12-31%20DM&utm_content=2016-12-31%20DM+CID_dc31a1a67a8df2de59ddb4ad388a124c&utm_source=Campaign%20Monitor%20Google%20Analytics&utm_term=Friday