

I'll Take Both Christmas Stories

Rev. Yme Woensdregt

Were you aware that there are two stories about Jesus' birth in the New Testament? If you read each story by itself, you will find that they are quite different from each other.

This comes as a surprise to many. We have done such a good job of mashing them together. We imagine a manger scene with Mary kneeling beside the child in a crib, Joseph standing off behind them, a group of animals around the feeding trough, and off to the side a group of shepherds and three wise men with their camels. Hovering over the whole scene is an angel.

Christmas carols do the same thing. They sing about a birth in a manger, attended by shepherds and magi. This way of telling the story has imprinted itself on our imaginations. It's almost impossible for us to read the original stories as if they tell a different story.

But the two stories told by Luke and Matthew are strikingly different.

Luke's story is the most familiar. Mary and Joseph live in Nazareth. An angel visits Mary to tell her that even though she is still single, she will give birth to a son. Near the end of her term, she and Joseph travel to Bethlehem because the Roman emperor has ordered a census. When they reach Bethlehem, they can't find accommodation, so the baby is born in a stable. Out in the fields beyond the town, a group of shepherds see a vision of angels who tell them of the birth. They rush to the manger and find the baby as the angels had revealed. After the birth, Mary and Joseph go home to Nazareth.

Matthew's story is markedly different. Mary and Joseph live in a house in Bethlehem (Matthew 2: 11). It's not Mary who is visited by an angel, but Joseph who has a dream in which the angel tells him that Mary hasn't cheated on him but is pregnant by God's holy spirit. Matthew only tells us that Jesus was born without any other details.

Some time later, "wise men from the East" come looking for one who is born to be king. They check in with Herod, the cruel paranoid puppet king of the Jews. In his fear that this newborn might usurp his power, he orders all baby boys under two years old in Bethlehem to be massacred. Joseph has another dream in which an angel warns him about Herod's murderous plans, and so Jesus' family escapes by fleeing to Egypt. After Herod has died some years later, the family returns to Israel and settles in Nazareth.

There are other differences, but you get the point. If we only had Matthew's story, there would be no manger scene, no shepherds, no choir of angels. If we only had Luke's story, there would be no wise men or massacre of the innocents.

Each story appears to be an overture to its gospel. The central themes of each gospel are reflected in the birth stories. For Matthew, Jesus is like Moses, who also delivered the Jews from the murderous wrath of a ruler. Herod's plot to kill Jesus calls to mind the story of Pharaoh ordering the death of all new-born Hebrew boys in the time of Moses. Matthew traces his ancestry through the kings of Judah. In Matthew, Jesus is a teacher.

Luke emphasizes Jesus as a prophet anointed by the Spirit to proclaim deliverance and liberation. Luke's genealogy includes prophets who are not included in Matthew's genealogy. In Luke, Jesus is a healer.

For me, both of these stories are metaphorical. As one noted scholar has put it, "this is purposeful storytelling, not scientifically determined chronology." Matthew and Luke tell these stories with a particular purpose in mind. They tell the story of Jesus in their gospels from their own particular perspective — and we can discern some of that in these vastly different narratives of Jesus' birth.

It's also interesting to note that the gospels and their stories of Jesus' birth were written quite late. The earliest writings in the New Testament are Paul's letters, written between 52 and 58 CE. He doesn't mention Jesus' birth. The earliest gospel is Mark, written about 70 CE. He has no birth story either. Only Luke and Matthew, from about 90–100 CE tell the stories of Jesus' birth. The latest gospel, John, has no birth story either, but traces Jesus' origins to the beginning of the universe.

Part of the reason is that Jesus' birth is not the central event of Christian faith. Most important is his death and resurrection. Without that, this birth would probably not have been remembered at all. When the church tells the story of Christ's continuing presence with us, it is a confession of faith. When we tell these stories, we affirm our loyalty to Jesus. We are not rehearsing history. We are confessing faith.

As a result, we choose to tell the story in a particular way to say that in this child, we see God acting decisively in the history of the world.

There are many ways to talk about the work of God. These two different stories of Jesus' birth points to the creative, imaginative ways of God in the world. There is more than one way to tell this story. There is more than one way to describe the reality of God.

Meister Eckhart, a 13th century Christian mystic, theologian, and preacher, spoke of the birth of Jesus as something that happens within us. The story of Jesus' birth is the story of Christ being born within us through the union of God's spirit with our flesh. Ultimately, the story of Jesus' birth is not just about the past, but about God's love being born within us in the present.

Just as Matthew and Luke tell the story differently, so we tell it anew every time we confess our own faith.