

God's Promise Fulfilled

It is kind of odd, really, but every three years we get to celebrate the birth of Christ twice. Within a few days of each other.

Now some people might think that this is great because it would mean a double dose of turkey, pie and presents. Others might be less enthusiastic about the thought of more shopping, baking or clean-up.

Let me explain. If Christmas is marked in our church services by the reading of a gospel story about the birth of Christ, then we are done. The gospel has been read. Today. Christmas is done, everything but the desert and the dishes.

If images of sugarplums were dancing in your head this morning, or you were reviewing shopping lists or to-do lists, you may have missed the words at the end of the gospel – she bore a son and he named him Jesus. There it is ... the birth of Jesus.

I promise, you can check it out yourself, Matthew 1:25; about the last ten words, depending on which translation you read. The Christmas story in ten words - she bore a son and he named him Jesus.

But you might well ask - where is the registration in one's hometown, the trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem, the innkeeper saying that there is no room, the stable with a manger, angels and shepherds? What about the stories that fill our carols, pageants, creche scenes and artwork? Those are all found in Luke's version of the events of Jesus birth.

In the text immediately before our reading today in the gospel of Matthew is the list of the all the generations that connect Jesus all the back to Abraham and David. As Matthew describes it:

“from Abraham to David are fourteen generations; and from David to the deportation to Babylon, fourteen generations; and from the deportation to Babylon to the Messiah, fourteen generations.” (Matthew 1:17)

Now, to give credit to Matthew, he is the only one who tells of the visit by the wise men. It is the story that comes immediately after today's reading. However, in Mary, Joseph and Jesus actual lives it probably occurs about two years after Jesus was born, and even if we will celebrate at Epiphany, twelve days after Christmas.

Mary bore a son and Joseph named him Jesus.

A few words that summarize the Christmas story, and yet, there is so much more. More than the multi-day trek for a pregnant Mary, and innkeepers, stables, angels, and shepherds. More than wise men from far away.

Mary bore a son and Joseph named him Jesus.

We need to go back a few months, when Joseph had found out that Mary was pregnant. They were engaged or betrothed, and in those days that was as much of a commitment as we have in marriage, but no sex. Joseph was about to dismiss Mary, to end the engagement when an angel appears to him in a dream.

The angel says: “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (v20)

This was in fulfilment of the promise made by God through the prophet Isaiah:

Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"
which means, "God is with us." (v23)

A son, sent to us, to be our saviour, to fulfil a promise, all because God loves us, all of us,
everyone of us. Okay, God may roll his eyes or shake her head, but God still loves us.

Why? Why was this baby born to Mary and named by Joseph? We only have to turn to those
well-known words of Jesus in the Gospel of John:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in
him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the
world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."
(John 3:16-17)

God loves us. As we celebrate Christmas we celebrate God's love for us.

We also see the incredible love that Joseph had for Mary. Joseph could have publicly shamed
Mary and reduced the shame on himself by divorcing her, by taking her to court to claim
the return of the bride-price which may have represented several years' worth of savings,
he could have impounded the dowry that her father may have given her for the marriage.

Joseph was planning on being this compassionate and loving before the angel. Before the angel
came to him and told him to take Mary as his wife.

Then Joseph so loved Mary that when the child was born, Joseph named him. By naming the
baby Joseph took him as his own, basically Joseph adopted him, gave him his roots back
to David and Abraham, made him legitimate within the community.

Joseph's love shown by compassion, commitment, honouring and obeying God.

This is a Christmas story that does not have angels, shepherds, innkeepers or stables.

It is a Christmas story that has Joseph's love of Mary, of Jesus and of God. It has Mary's love of
Jesus and of God. It has God's love of Joseph, Mary, ... and us.

It is the love that gives hope in the face of injustice and despair.
the love that gives peace in the face of hatred,
the love that gives joy in the face of grief and loss.

Mary bore a son and Joseph named him Jesus. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Readings: Matthew 1:18-25