

Room at the Manger

A Sermon Expositing the Lukan and Matthean Birth Narratives

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B: Now may the words of my mouth...

A: Eckhem...

B: Now may the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight O God, our rock and our redeemer.

A: We've never done this before.

B: Between the two of us we have over 15 years in parish ministry,

A: We have studied the Bible for 20 years,

B: preached somewhere near 500 sermons (mostly his),

A: have six degrees (mostly hers),

B: and we've published one book together.

A: I've published one book.

B: Well, you did a lot of it. {Glare} Ok, most of it.

A: What's the title?

B: Fine, it's your book...but I proof read, some of it...anyway, even with all that, we have never preached a sermon together. So we thought, "If we want to try our hand at telling together the story of Jesus, why not start at the beginning?"

B: And what is the beginning of the story of Jesus? What happened that magical night in Bethlehem? Think of all our table-top nativity sets with the wise men gathered with the shepherd and the sheep. Think of the ox and the donkey just over Joseph's shoulder in all those renaissance paintings. Hear the words of popular music asking, "Mary, did you know?"

A: She did.

B: She almost certainly did. But what does the Bible tell us? What does the gospel say about the birth of Jesus?

A: That's a great question! The Bible tells us an angel was sent from God with news that a child who would change the whole world - would save the whole world - was soon to be born in Bethlehem. He was sent to give this news to...**Joseph/Mary!**

B: Wait, no. Gabriel came and gave the news to Mary that she would give birth to a son who would one day rule the nations.

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

A: No. I don't know who this Gabriel is, but it says quite clearly here in my Greek New Testament that an unnamed messenger of the Lord came to Joseph and told him that his betrothed, Mary, is "with child," but not to jump to any conclusions.

B: {mocking} "In my Greek New Testament." Blah, blah, blah. I can see right here in the Bible's original language, English, that his name was Gabriel and he was talking to Mary! Who, by the way, had to get on a donkey and travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be counted with her not-quite-yet-husband, Joseph for some dumb Census for Augustus.

A: There isn't any historical evidence for a census under Augustus. Besides, Mary and Joseph were already in Bethlehem when Mary conceived and they were still there when Jesus was about to be born.

B: If they were already living there, Ms. Smarty Pants,

A: eckhem...

B: ugh...*DOCTOR*. Smarty Pants...If they were already living in Bethlehem, why would they have needed an Inn!?

A: What are you talking about? There's no Inn.

B: Yes there is!!! There's no room there, they have to go out in the stable, Jesus is placed in a feeding trough...ring a bell?

A: I think your bell has been rung one too many times. The Greek clearly states that they visited Jesus in an oikos.

B: I haven't the foggiest idea what an oikos is, but who visited Jesus there!? You mean the shepherds?

A: Shepherds!? What shepherds!? It was three magi, three wise men, three kings. Everyone has their own version, but it definitely wasn't shepherds.

B: It was so shepherds and it says so right here in the New Revised Standard Version of the Good Book! What in the world kind of Bible are you reading over there!!!??

A: Me? What kind of Bible are you reading!?

Simultaneous: I'm reading the gospel of Jesus Christ according to **Matthew/Luke**!!.....Oooooohhhh...

A: You're reading Luke? I'm reading Matthew. It seems these gospels of ours just don't tell the same story. Matthew and Luke see things differently. In Matthew the angel visits Joseph; in Luke, Mary. In Luke, Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem; in Matthew, they're already there. In Matthew the bedside visitors are magi; in Luke, they're shepherds.

B: Why would they do that? Why would they tell two different versions of the same story? Are they confused? Did one of them forget their lines and just start ad libbing? Which one of them is lying!?

A: Neither of them are lying. It's true some of their details may not be the same. Some of that might be because they received different oral reports of how things happened. There is an entire generation between the life of Jesus and the writing of the gospels. But another reason they're different is that they have different reasons for telling the story. Their communities are facing different problems and struggling with different questions, and in both cases, the story of Jesus offers a framework for understanding their lives and challenges.

B: Well, I find that confusing. I'm glad that people in the modern world all have the same story to tell, that our lives are largely similar, that we all have common problems, and that we're all in general agreement on all things social, political, and religious.

A: Yeah. Your bell has definitely been rung. *We* don't even agree on all of those things and we've been married for fifteen years.

B: *And* written a book together.

A: No, we haven't. You can't even agree on the fact that I wrote the thing and my name is on the cover!

B: It's my name too, Dr. - - Bowden.

A: Whatever. If you really think people are the same, have the same opinions, and agree on most everything then you've been asleep your entire life and especially these last couple of years. Even in the face of a global pandemic we find it difficult to agree on how to respond and what level of risk is acceptable as a society - vaccines, masks, mandates, distancing, lockdowns. We've seen serious political discord too: polls, election results, scandals, debt ceiling, infrastructure, military presence. We don't even see eye-to-eye in churches: who can the church ordain, what constitutes a marriage, what should the church's stance regarding reproductive rights be, method of communion, type of music, color of the carpet...Life is full of difference. There are more opinions on this planet than there are people. And there are even more situations in life - people who find it difficult to make ends meet and others who have plenty; people who have lived their entire lives in oppression and others with a great deal of privilege; we even have people with life experiences so foreign to others that they find it hard to get people to believe their stories.

It seems, then, we're no different than the gospel writers. We've all got our own thoughts, our own needs, our own questions, and because of that we all do things differently from religious observance and who we vote for, to how we put the toilet paper on the roll!

B: What?

A: There are strong opinions on which way the toilet paper should hang. Over or under. I've even known a few people who will stop and change it if they find it the "wrong" way.

B: And are you one of those people?

A: Maybe.

B: I'm not sure I can handle all that difference and discord. Our lives would be so much better if we could all just agree and come up with a way forward for everyone. It's either shepherds or magi, we can't have both!

A: But we do have both! And what's so terrible about that? If we only had one, we would lose out on hearing from a community who took heart in hearing there is room at the manger for magi from the east. We wouldn't get to reflect on the fact that there is no distance, nor nationality, nor allegiance that can keep one from the manger. AND we would miss out on hearing from a community who needed to know that the birth of Christ isn't just for the elite - the kings, rulers, and their kind. It's for the shepherds too, the ones who tirelessly work the fields, the ones who labor with little payout. It's both - shepherds and magi.

B: I guess there is something kind of nice about knowing that even the story of Christmas has been not only a story *about* diversity, but also a story that has *come from* diversity from the very beginning. It makes me wonder, if two perspectives are good, wouldn't four be better? How do Mark and John, the other gospel writers, see the birth of Jesus?

A: Let's look. I'll take Mark, you take John.

{feigned pause for reading}

Hmm. Mark didn't have anything to say about Jesus's birth at all. Even so, I suppose there is room at the manger for Mark. What does John say?

B: {shocked} It's weird. It's real weird.

A: There's room at the manger for that too.

B: Are you sure?

A: Well, if there isn't room at the manger for weird people, where will you go to celebrate Christmas?

B: Very funny. But I get your point. This thing we're doing together, this faith thing, this living a sacred story thing doesn't require that we all have the same experience or see things the same or be in agreement all the time. I guess I do see the beauty in all that. I mean here we are with all of our opinions and perspectives and different ideas and we were able to sit down together and write a...

A: IT'S MY BOOK!!

B: Sermon. I was going to say, "sermon."

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah, back to the point. In fact, the story itself comes to us as a kind of biblical disagreement; and maybe that's part of what's so wonderful about it. If there's more than one look at who this baby is and what he means to the world, it warns against making Jesus in our own image. It reminds us to listen to what others have to say about Jesus. It reminds us the church is a *community* of people, not an amalgamation of beliefs.

B: I like that and all, but some people are just wrong you know.

A: Maybe, but the gospels don't seem to put a lot of emphasis on who's right and who's wrong, just that there's room at the manger for everyone.

B: So there's room for me at the manger even when I'm wrong?

A: Yes. And there's even room at the manger for me when... *if I'm wrong.*

B: That would suggest then that there's room for hyper-political uncles who like to make a scene at Christmas.

A: Yep. And the challenge is there is room at the manger even for those whose opinions or ideas cause harm. Even Herod finds his place in the Christmas story.

B: What about the folks who don't want to be at the manger?

A: Well, it's not coercive, but there'll be a place there if and when they wish to join us. There's room for the rich and the poor.

B: Room at the manger for those who've had too many Christmas cookies and for the hungry.

A: There's room at the manger for those who don't belong anywhere else and for those who can go anywhere.

B: There's room for men and women and folx of all gender identities.

A: There's room for married and single and divorced and widowed and dating and "it's complicated."

B: There is room at the manger if you're here with us in person or if you're Zooming in.

A: There is even room at the manger for those whose religion doesn't center on the manger.

B: So, just to be clear...the manger here is a metaphor for faithful community, right?

A: Yes. Why?

B: Oh good. Because. There's no manger in Matthew.

Simultaneous: {somewhat irritated} Amen.