

ADVENT IV The Annunciation St. Alban's Church

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

As you will recall, there are only two gospel accounts in the New Testament that include the nativity of Our Lord ---- Matthew and Luke, and there is no mention of his birth in any of the epistles of Paul. The two gospel nativity narratives are very different. And today's gospel lesson provides a good example of that difference because the birth is revealed to Joseph in Matthew while in Luke, it is Mary who receives the holy news. Blending them into one account as we do for Christmas pageants produces an odd mixture of the two which simply doesn't work conceptually because it is nearly impossible to reconcile Matthew's emphasis on the slaughter of the innocents and the flight to Egypt with Luke's focus on shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night in a field adjacent to the birthplace of Jesus --- a scene which we acknowledge every year by singing "*Silent Night*" by candlelight on Christmas Eve. It's hard to think of any carol which has as its subject Herod's massacre of the male firstborn of Israel which may be why we always fall back on either this beloved German tune or *O Little town of Bethlehem!*

The fact that in Luke the announcement comes to Mary is worth noting, in part because it points to a distinctive characteristic of Luke's account: the focus on women. "Luke's gospel proper (as opposed to the Acts of the Apostles which is a kind of companion volume) makes mention of women and balances female and male more than any of the other gospels." Matthew only accords righteousness to Joseph, whereas in Luke, the following are deemed to be worthy of being included in that category: both Elizabeth and Zechariah, Mary (the mother of Jesus) as well as Joseph, and both Simeon and Anna the prophet celebrated in the *Nunc dimittis* canticle used in both our Morning and Evening Prayer daily offices.

Luke is also famous for his emphasis on the marginalized, the poor and the outcast. Note, for example, that the shepherds in Luke's account came from one of the very lowest of all classes in 1st century Palestine --- peasants doing manual labor for very little compensation and stuck with a reputation for theft and laziness. He takes great pains to emphasize the obligation of the rich toward the poor. Luke's unusual focus on the Holy Spirit is demonstrated by its appearance to make an announcement about the holy birth to John the Baptist, to Mary, to Elizabeth, Zechariah, and Simeon. In Matthew, the same angelic messenger visits only Joseph. In Luke, these initial visits are supplemented throughout the career of Jesus, the itinerant preacher, appearing first at his baptism in the Jordan.

In both Matthew's and Luke's narratives, we are provided with a very complex backdrop: the birth occurs "*within Christianity, within Judaism and within the Roman Empire.*" When we overlook these elements, much of the meaning is drained out of the accounts. As to Christianity and Judaism, we know that the *Song of Mary* which is known to us as the *Magnificat* traces its origins to Hannah at the birth of Samuel as described in I Samuel 2: 1 ("My heart rejoices in the Lord, in the Lord I now hold my head

high (and am) exultant because thou hast saved me”) and Judith after vanquishing Holofernes in the book of Judith 13: 11 (“God, even our God, is with us, to show his power yet in Jerusalem, and his force against the enemy, as he hath done this day”). And Luke relies on songs created by the early Christian communities in dramatizing events such as the Annunciation. The groups of followers of Jesus for whom he was writing venerated the Christian poems put in the mouths of Mary and Simeon when they were performed (because they were a form of performance art as part of the oral tradition of passing down history to the next generation). Additionally, Gabriel is the traditional name of the angel who drove Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden as described in Enoch 27. The fall of mankind, through this means, was being reversed for the new Eve, Mary.

To appreciate the Roman context, we need to know that Caesar Augustus was entitled “*Lord, Son of God, Bringer of Peace, and Savior of the World.*” And those are the very titles that “the angelic messengers give to Jesus in the Christmas story in Luke (*Son of the Most High, Son of God, Savior, Lord, and Bringer of Peace.*)” We have only to consider “the brutality with which the kingdom of Rome struck Jesus’s Galilean heartland around the very time of his birth” to recognize the staggering contrast evoked by the use of these terms in the birth narratives. Israel and Rome were on a fixed course leading to struggle, rebellion, the shedding of much blood, and the destruction of sacred landmarks. You can almost sense the inevitability of this coming conflict in the accounts of the evangelists.

The “combination of the scandalous or irregular union (namely, Mary is single and pregnant) and of divine intervention through the women” explain Matthew’s choice in genealogy. He traces the origins of Jesus back to Abraham, whereas Luke links Jesus with Adam. At its very beginning, Christianity “described the divine and virginal conception of Jesus precisely to exalt it over all those other ones -- and especially over that of Caesar Augustus.” But all of this is by way of saying that the links between our nativity accounts and both Greco-Roman and older Jewish themes are manifest throughout. This was a pre-Enlightenment world, so the belief was widely shared that “the interaction of the human and divine...could produce a child who would bring transcendental benefit to the human race.”

N. T. Wright who has spent a lifetime studying scripture tells us that this birth narrative “says nothing about Mary remaining a virgin after Jesus’ birth...nor does it say anything about the goodness or badness of sexual identity or sexual relations” because none of that was on the minds of Matthew or Luke in relating the story of the virgin birth. “They are simply reporting that Jesus did not have a father in the ordinary way, and that this was because Mary had been given special grace to be the mother of God’s incarnate self.” Further, “Luke has no thought that this might make Jesus somehow less than fully human.” These issues arose much later in the early church; they are not addressed in the gospels. In these accounts, “Mary and Elizabeth shared a dream...that one day all that the prophets had said would come true. One day Israel’s God would do what he had said to Israel’s earliest ancestors: all nations would be blessed through Abraham’s family.”

“...you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David.....the Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God... Then Mary said: “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be according to your word.””

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.
Amen.

Sources

N.T. Wright, Luke for Everyone, SPCK, London, 2001

Marcus J. Borg and John Dominic Crossan, The First Christmas, Harper One, NY, 2007

Gary Wills, What the Gospels Meant, Penguin, NY, 2008