

The Nativity of the Lord
Sermon for December 24/25
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Isaiah 9:2-7
Psalm 96
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20
(John 1:1-15)

You may have noticed that the Gospel printed on your lectionary sheets was not the translation I read. I read from the King James version because I don't think a royal census or registration quite makes that point: it was about the taxes. It was about a king some 3,000 miles away being able to dictate what you owe and what you pay. It was about a king having the power of life and death over you, your friends and your family. It was about a time when the world was submerged in darkness and there was not light in it. That was the time into which Jesus was born.

The Romans ruled Palestine, and had for nearly two hundred years. There had been only a small window of time when Judea was free after the Syrian oppressors were thrown over when Jerusalem was ruled by the Jews. And then the Romans came, and trampled out freedom and extinguished the lights of hope. This was the time into which Jesus was born.

Wherever you walk, you encounter soldiers each day, and they carry spears and swords and arrows, and should one of them decide to end your life, they would be able to do so with impunity. Life has no value in and of itself. This was the time into which Jesus was born. It was time of darkness.

Here in New Mexico, when you go out, away from the lights of towns and cities, into the expanse of the desert, when there are only stars in the sky, you can lift up your hand in front of your face, and you can't see it. It is so dark that you are surrounded by the dark. The lights of heaven seem so distant and they do not seem to cast any light on us at all. It was into this darkness that Jesus was born.

Imagine a flame burning in the darkness, drawing you in, illuminating your life and the lives around you: a light so intense that the darkness cannot stand against it. The birth of Jesus was that light, and that's the light we see in the darkness of this night.

How can this be? Do you realize how absurd this event is? Here we have Mary and Joseph in a stable, and angels appear to shepherds to tell them that Jesus is the Son of God. That's just silly. I mean really, that like some pregnant couple showing up at the Bethel Community Storehouse, only to be put up in a shed out back to have their kid. And the Angels, well the angels fly over to the shelter at St. Martin's in Albuquerque to tell the homeless to make their way over to Moriarty to see the birth of divine royalty.

It makes no sense. Why would the King of the Universe have his son born in a stable to people who are of questionable social value and who have no influence over anything in their world. Mary's a child and Joseph's a handyman, not even a craftsman. They're going to live their lives hand to mouth, and they're bringing into this world, the son of God. It's absurd. And who are the first to hear about it from the Angels? The divine messengers take the word of God to a bunch of shepherders, the dregs of society, who can find no other line of work, and who no one will have anything to do with. They smell, but they are the ones invited to bear witness to the birth. It makes no sense? Or does it?

On the one hand, we have the divine light of love coming into the world, and on the other we have such absolutely human drama wrapped in the poverty of the world. Such extremes in one event: human and divine – opposites and yet joined together in the birth of Jesus. This all must mean something.

In Jewish tradition, the Scriptures operate at three levels. On the first, the Scriptures tell the story and it is understood in the historical context of that day and time. On the second, the story fits into the tradition of the Scriptures and the events that preceded and the events that followed the story. On the third, the Scripture and the Story must be read in the contemporary context and what it means today to us.

We see the story of Jesus and Mary and Joseph as the birth of the Messiah in the time of the Roman occupation. We fit the story of the birth of Jesus in the context of the tradition of a transition from the times of the Prophets into the birth of the Messiah to reform the Temple tradition. And the third, what does the birth of Jesus mean for us today?

For me, the birth of Jesus means that we need to redefine what birth means each and every day. We have to begin to understand the birth of children as divine events. We must begin to treat the lives we are given as divine gifts. Each child born should be thought of as a messiah. Each child born should be understood as a life that can change the world. Each child should be nurtured, educated, cherished, encouraged, praised and loved each and every day of their life.

That is what the nativity means to us today, the opportunity to bring the messiah into the world, and to make the world a better place. Each child brings the possibility of light into the world that continues in darkness. Each child carries the light to lead the world further away from the darkness.

“The People who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.”

Jesus is that light, and the darkness has not overcome it. Let us nurture the light of the divine in the children of our lives.