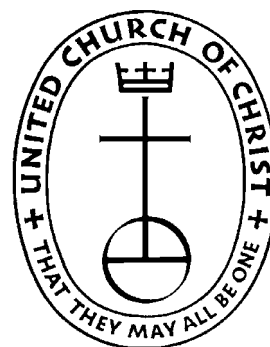


Child of God

A Sermon By —
JERALD M. STINSON
December 24, 2008



This Christmas Eve sermon tells of how the mythic stories of Jesus' birth underscore the meaning his early followers found in his life and teachings: that Jesus was a window to divine love for everyone, especially to those cast out by their society.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

*A Liberal Church, Welcoming of All,
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241 Cedar Avenue, Long Beach, California

Rev. Jerald Stinson
December 24, 2008 (#1349)

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CHILD OF GOD

It is Christmas Eve, and for at least a little while, we can take deep breaths and relax in this sacred space where we seek refreshment for our souls. These are moments away from family obligations, and from last-minute shopping, wrapping, and worrying about whether tomorrow will live up to our expectations.

This is a time for carols and candles and for hearing ancient stories of an inn-keeper and angels, of shepherds and magi; stories of a Bethlehem manger and of peace on earth.

But can we really believe those stories? Some of you just accept them by faith. Others just don't ask that question. But if you are like me, you want to know if the stories are true. And I'm convinced that the nativity stories do not depict something that actually happened at a certain time and place in history. They are myths, but nevertheless stories with great power.

Tonight I want to talk about how the stories developed and why it is that I continue to find great meaning in them; why I continue to say they are true even if not historically accurate.

Many of today's best scholars think Jesus was born in Nazareth, not Bethlehem. The son of an unwed young peasant mother, we know virtually nothing about his childhood and youth. But we do know that as an adult he began a movement to reform the Judaism of his day.

A remarkable teacher, he told powerful stories distinguishing between the Empire of Rome, on the one hand, with its violence, revenge, class distinctions and wealth – and the Empire of God, on the other hand, rooted in peace, forgiveness, radical equality and generous sharing.

Although fully human, I think Jesus was transparent to God's love, a window through which divine love could be seen and experienced. He offered hope and transformation to all with whom he came into contact.

And because of that, he became a threat to those in power and the Roman authorities executed him. But they could not kill the movement he had begun. He lived on

through that movement. James, Peter and others kept his message alive in Judea; Paul and Silas spread the Jesus Way throughout the empire.

At first, the movement depended on stories told by those who had actually known Jesus. But as the years went on and those witnesses were gone, the stories were written down and told in new ways that would reach across cultures. The earliest writings, Paul's letters and the Gospels of Mark and Thomas, did not have birth stories; they focused only on the adult Jesus.

But the gospels of Matthew and Luke, from the latter years of the first century, created the mythic stories we retell tonight in an effort to help people in the Greco-Roman world value Jesus' life.

Although those stories weren't historically factual, I think they were still true. Joseph Campbell says a myth is a tale told to tell a truth. Thomas Mann said "a myth is a story about the way things never were, but always are." That's true of the Christian nativity stories.

In ancient Hellenistic cultures, great leaders are often depicted as having special births. A Greek god in the form of his father was thought to have impregnated the mother of Theagenes, an Olympic champion with 1,400 gold medals. A bolt of lightning was said to have struck and impregnated Alexander the Great's mother. Attia, Augustus Caesar's mother, was human, but the god Apollo was supposedly his father. There were special birth stories about Plato, Hercules and Pythagoras.

So when Luke began to write for a Hellenistic audience, wanting Jesus seen as unique and special, he created stories of a human mother and divine father. That myth created underlined the importance of Jesus' life.

Now you would think if Matthew and Luke were going to create a birth story to honor Jesus, they could have done better than a stable in an obscure village. The Buddha, for instance, was born a prince and lived in wonderful palaces. But Jesus, born in a stable, is the child of a peasant mother and hard-working landless father. That part of the myth probably reflects some factual reality – it isn't the kind of story someone would make up to impress people. And for the early churches this part of the story meant God's love came alive in the midst of the ordinary. God's love was found among the poor and suffering.

Now what characters did the storytellers place in that Bethlehem stable? Shepherds, poor and ritually unclean because they worked with animals. A Judean inn-keeper who went out of his way to help a couple from the Galilee. And of course Mary

and Joseph – peasant expendables in the Roman world, just as their son would be an expendable peasant.

Matthew added some surprising figures to that scene – the magi, probably Zoroastrian astrologers from Persia, foreigners from another culture and religion.

We retell these stories year after year so that those who feel cast out in our society – maybe the homeless, or those on parole, or victims of abuse or GLBT people wishing to marry – so that they can be warmed by the sense that Jesus' birth was celebrated by people outside the circles of respectability in his culture.

And there was also scandal to his birth – shame attached to an unwed, pregnant Mary. I think the storytellers would have left out that part had it not been based on reality. The stories of a virgin birth may be totally mythic, but the scandal of a pregnancy outside wedlock probably very real. As I have said before, I think it is possible that Mary may have been raped by a Roman soldier garrisoned in Galilee; they were notorious for turning local women into objects of degradation.

Does that ruin the story? Not for me; instead it shows God's love present in even the ugliest and most painful of situations, God's love amidst scandal and shame. The birth stories affirm that Mary's child, perhaps degraded and abused by others because of the scandal of his birth, became a unique window into God's unconditional, accepting love.

Fred Craddock, a Disciples of Christ minister, taught preaching for years at Phillips Theological Seminary in Oklahoma. While there, he and his wife took a vacation to Gatlinburg, Tennessee.

He said one evening they discovered a charming restaurant where just the two of them were to have a relaxing meal. While awaiting their food, they noticed a distinguished white-haired man moving from table to table, visiting the guests. Craddock leaned over and whispered to his wife, "I hope he doesn't come here."

But, of course, that is exactly what he did. Arriving at their table, he amiably asked, "Where are you folks from?" Craddock answered tersely, "Ada, Oklahoma."

"Splendid place I hear, although I have never visited there. What do you do for a living?" the man asked.

Craddock replied, "I teach homiletics at the Graduate Seminary at Phillips University," hoping the technical term would end the conversation.

“Oh, so you teach preachers to preach, do you? Well, have I got a story for you.” And with that the man pulled up a chair and sat down at the table with Craddock and his wife. Craddock groaned inwardly, thinking to himself, “Oh no, another preacher story.”

The man began: “My name’s Ben Hooper. I was born just across the mountains. My mother was not married, so the shame that fell on her, fell on me as well. When I started school, my classmates had this name for me, and it wasn’t a very nice name. Many was the time I would go off by myself at recess and lunchtime because the taunts of my classmates cut so deeply...

“But the worst thing was to go with my mother to town on Saturday afternoon. People would look at me like they were boring a hole right through me because I knew they were all wondering who my daddy was...

“When I was about twelve years old, a new preacher came to our little mountain church. I would sit at the back of the church and skip out early to avoid talking with anyone. But one Sunday the preacher said the benediction so fast after his sermon, I ended up getting caught behind some older ladies ...

“Just when I figured I could get around them and scoot out the door, I felt this big hand on my shoulder. I looked up and there was the preacher looking right back at me...

“‘Who are you, son? Whose boy are you?’ he said in a friendly way. I felt a familiar dread coming over me. It was like a big cloud I could never get away from. I stood there silent as he looked down at me, studying my face. Then he smiled, a big smile. ‘Wait a minute,’ he said, ‘I know who you are. I see the family resemblance. You’re God’s child.’ Then he slapped me on the rump and said, ‘Boy, you’ve got an inheritance. Go and claim it.’”

The white-haired man looked across the table at Craddock and said, “That was the single most important sentence ever said to me.” He got up, saying, “Isn’t that a great story?” Then he moved to another table.

Dr. Craddock asked the waitress, “Do you know who that man was who was just sitting at our table?”

She grinned and said, “Of course, everybody here knows him. That’s Ben Hooper, the former governor of Tennessee.”

The preacher at that Tennessee mountain church understood the truth of the Christmas myths: that just as Jesus was a child of God, just as the shepherds and the magi and the innkeeper and the teenage mother and peasant father were all children of God, so also Ben Hooper was God's child.

We retell the Christmas myths so that those who have felt looked down upon and judged by others can be comforted by stories that say all were welcome at Jesus' birth, just as they were welcome throughout his ministry.

The nativity stories picture that Bethlehem stable open to all and safe for all. The myths introduce the words and deeds of the adult Jesus who created a radically inclusive community. And that's exactly what we are called to become today, a radically inclusive church.

These now-familiar stories were created by early Christians to help those in the Greek world see that Jesus could become for them, as he had become for his Galilean followers, a window into God's love.

For me, God is not a being out there somewhere but is rather the very Ground of All Being. God penetrates the universe in such a way that every part of it exists in God. God is that eternal presence beneath and within our everyday lives.

And the metaphors we use to describe that eternal presence emerge from the life of Jesus – as well as from the mythic stories of his birth.

So tonight let us revel in the truth, wonder and wisdom of the ancient nativity stories. May the myths live on, may the stories never die, of a stable filled with unconditional love and a stable open to all. Amen.