

CHRISTMAS STORIES

Helena, the sainted mother of Emperor Constantine, used the influence and wealth of her son to build churches in the Holy Land. Three centuries after the events described in the gospels, she went to Jerusalem to build a church where Jesus was buried and to Bethlehem to build a church where Jesus was born.

I have been to both a few times but then, I have also been to Jericho where a guide showed me the actual Sycamore tree that Zacchaeus climb up into so that he could see over the taller people when Jesus came to town.

Now, Helena was no archaeologist determined to preserve history. She was a devout worshipper so when she asked people in Bethlehem where Jesus had been born, the locals showed her a shepherd's cave. She, of course, did not enshrine the cave, she had the entire hill excavated and a replacement cave made in the lower floor of the great cathedral of the Nativity out of precious marble.

Visitors to the Church of the Nativity are often treated to a plaintive tour guide who says that the manger in which Jesus was born is not on display there, not because such a crude wooden item would have turned to dust and ash thousands of years ago but, because it was stolen by the Catholic Church and is housed in the Vatican..... the absurdity of that claim never seems to trouble Israeli tour guides nor the curators of the Vatican's treasures who have no intentions to relinquishing the manger that has no more to do with Jesus than I have to do with managing the caviar trade in Russia. Sometimes it is hard to embarrass religious people.

One of the most difficult issues in teaching Bible in my college classes is the fact that moderns tend to be so fact literal. You read the parables where Jesus says that the Kingdom is like a man who had two sons and then another parable says that the Kingdom is like a woman who lost a coin and modern people get mad and say, "Well which is it? Is it like a man with two sons or a woman who lost a coin because it can't be both!"

I sit in the back of our sanctuary and watch world renowned Biblical scholar, Dr. David Trobisch, patiently teaching us about the gospels, understanding them as stories written to help us understand great truths, metaphors used to open the mind to see reality in new ways, and, inevitably, at the end of the class, someone will raise their hand and ask, "But how do we know that this really happened?"

I complimented David once on his uncommon patience and in the midst of the conversation someone came up to him to demand an explanation for why God would be so cruel as to kill all of the animals on earth in the world wide flood of Noah when it was the people who had been sinful. I responded, "Don't you understand that it is a sermon and not a bit of history, there has never been a world- wide flood." And David interjected, "Well, in a way, it happens every time the story is read."

That is the power of story telling.... It becomes real in the moment it is shared in a community in order to bring about something that is real within us.

When St Helena went to Bethlehem, she was looking for the stable mentioned in

Luke's gospel. But that was just a choice she made. In Matthew, Jesus was born in a house. The two gospel accounts of the birth of Jesus have almost nothing in common other than the gender of the child. In Matthew, the holy family lives in Bethlehem but flees to avoid the slaughter of the innocents and ends up settling in Nazareth. In Luke, the family lives in Nazareth but are compelled in the most unlikely manner to visit Bethlehem for a Roman census and then return to their home after the birth.

Neither account is historically true. Jesus was, in all likelihood, born in and grew up in Nazareth (recognizing that the existence of Nazareth is also somewhat historically dubious but let's not wade into the weeds too far). Neither Mark nor John are interested in the geography or circumstances of Jesus' birth. Matthew and Luke both have reasons of Jewish heritage to say that he was born in Bethlehem but Matthew and Luke don't compare notes.

The shepherds, angels, stable and the magnificat are only in Luke. The magi, star, and flight to Egypt are only in Matthew. The one thing that both have in common is that neither is the slightest bit interested in the historical facts because they are too busy trying to tell us an important story.... And we're still wondering why the Vatican refuses to give that old wooden manger back to the church in Bethlehem where it belongs.

The best way to kill a good story is to try to take it too literally. One of the great rallying cries of the Progressive Christian movement is that we take the Bible seriously but not literally. The question we should be asking is, if Luke and Matthew had no facts about the historical circumstances of the birth of Jesus, then why did they write these accounts? Why? What do they mean? What is the message?.... Those are the questions every story teller is actually trying to answer.

Matthew is at pains to tell the Jesus story in a way that proves to us that he is the true Jewish messiah. He begins his account with a long genealogy tracing Jesus through the family of Joseph back to Abraham and then he tells us that Joseph wasn't really his father... like I said, Matthew doesn't want to be disturbed with any logical facts, he is telling us a story.

Like Matthew, his story is full of powerful irony. Though Matthew will quote Old Testament texts repeatedly through the next 25 chapters of his book to prove that Jesus was the messiah, he completely leaves the Jews out of his birth narrative. No one in the temple was aware of the birth of Jesus, but some foreign astrologers knew about it and they traveled across the wilderness to come bring presents. Astrologers were anathema to Jews. Practicing astrology is punishable by death, according to Deuteronomy 17 and yet, Matthew, the most Jewish of New Testament writers, is willing to slap traditional Judaism in the face and insist that gentiles knew about Jesus and his own people didn't.

There is a real message of humility in this. As Michael Franti sings, "God is too big for just one religion." Matthew tells us a story of a messiah who comes into the world, embraced by those who seek him but endangered by the both the institutions of religion and government. The priests are indifferent and Herod tries to kill him, so that Jesus is aided by members of another religion and then is forced to flee as a

political refugee. If you let Matthew tell the story his own way, you see how we Christians are always uneasy around institutional religion, the halls of political power, and we can always look for Jesus among the refugees and the illegal immigrants.

Luke tells his Christmas story with entirely different details but hauntingly similar themes. For Luke, Jesus is born into poverty and suffers both indignity and rejection by government and religion.

They are forced from their home by an oppressive occupying government and then in Bethlehem, they are not even shown the dignity to be allowed to give birth in doors. We have all heard all of our lives that there was "no room" in the inn for them but I am inclined to think that Luke had something even more pointed in mind.

Ancient inns did not rent "rooms." They were not like a Days Inn, after all. Inns were just big houses largely comprised of a lower floor and an upper room. Customers just paid to come in and they found a place on the floor among the other guests. At what point does an inn keeper in the ancient world tell a paying customer, "I don't want any more money"?

It is possible that Luke is suggesting to us that for religious reasons, it was not simply that there was not room inside, it is that there was no room among all those people for Mary and Jesus. Again, in Jewish tradition, everyone who is in a house when a woman gives birth is defiled and must make an offering. Perhaps Luke is telling us that Jesus was rejected by formal religion even before he was born..... something that all of us who have been rejected by either family or faith because we were somehow "unclean" in their judgment should be able to appreciate.

Where do we find Jesus in Luke's story? Out in the barn, among all of the stuff that you know is found in a barn. And to whom is the divine birth announcement given? Not to priests or kings but only to shepherds in the field. We modern Americans tend to romanticize shepherds but don't kid yourselves....being a shepherd was the real night cashier job at Walmart in those days. Sheep are smelly and stupid and they have to be watched all of the time. Shepherds didn't get to observe Sabbath and they were always unclean literally or religiously.

That angels appeared to shepherds who were led to a barn where Jesus was born is a statement that you will find Jesus in homeless shelter for runaway teens where some unwed teen-ager just had a baby. If you let Luke tells his story his way, you can appreciate why Jim Wallis says that no one goes to heaven without three references from homeless people.

The Jesus story is real, and every time we tell it, we bring good news to the poor, we bring hope to those in despair, we shine a light in dark places, promising justice to the oppressed, the refugee, the homeless and the unemployed. The story of Christmas is not the first corner stone of a new organized religion. It is a story that begins our story, our story of standing up to governments and churches, of siding with the poor and the oppressed.... as my favorite musician, Bruce Cockburn, sings, we keep "kicking at the darkness until it bleeds daylight."