

Christmas Day
It's Not the Birth

December 25, 2023
Luke 2:1-20

Today is Christmas; or, more properly, the Nativity of Our Lord. It's the day to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the Christ. While we have made this birth into a major event in both the secular and religious worlds, it isn't such a big deal in the Bible.

The Gospel of Mark says nothing about the birth of Jesus.

The Gospel of Matthew has about a third of a verse devoted to the birth: "... she had given birth to a son"¹

The Gospel of John presents more of a theological statement about the coming of Jesus in half of a verse: "The Word became flesh and lived among us."² He doesn't mention that Jesus was born in Bethlehem.

There is the familiar verse in Luke that talk about the birth of Jesus: "And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place in the guest room."³

(The Greek word refers to a place where one can rest. The same word is used in Luke 22:11 to refer to the "guest room" where Jesus will eat the Passover with his disciples. A completely different word is used in Luke 10:34 when the Good Samaritan brings the injured man to an "inn." It's likely that the rooms for sleeping were upstairs in the house, including the guest room. It may already have been filled or not large enough for a mother to give birth. A downstairs room housed the animals where a manger – a food trough – would have been.)

The birth of Jesus was not all that important to the gospel writers. It's even less important to the letter writers. They never mention it.

Even for the gospel writers, it's not the birth that's the most important thing. It's the meanings related to the birth that are much more important. We look more closely at what Luke says.

This birth indicates the fulfillment of God's promises. What God said would happen – as absurd as it might sound – did happen. A virgin gives birth to a son and he is named Jesus. Both Matthew and Luke agree on this point.

Our God keeps his promises. At the end of Luke, when Jesus tells the criminal on the cross, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise,"⁴ we can believe that that will happen. God keeps his promises.

When the resurrected Jesus tells his disciples: "Repentance and forgiveness of sins is to be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem."⁵ We can be sure that these two things happen: The preaching about the forgiveness of sins has happened in all nations; and, more importantly, we believe the promise that Christ indeed forgives our sins. What God says happens.

Christmas is not just about the birth, it's about God keeping his promises to us today.

Another theme from Luke's story of Jesus' birth is joy. The angels sing a joyous song at

¹ Matthew 1:25b

² John 1:14a

³ Luke 2:7

⁴ Luke 23:43

⁵ Luke 24:47

Jesus' birth. There is joy in heaven. After the shepherds have visited the Christ child it says: "The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them."⁶

Hearing and seeing God's promises fulfilled in Jesus changed their attitude about life.

Later in the chapter when Simeon sees baby Jesus in the temple, he sings that he can now die in peace. He has seen the Lord's salvation. What he saw was the infant Jesus.

Christmas is not just about the birth, it's about God coming to save us from our sins and the punishment they deserve. It's not just about what Jesus did over 2000 years ago, it's about our lives in the here and now. We see God's salvation in Jesus, not just the Jesus in the manger, but the Jesus who meets us in the scriptures and the Jesus who comes to us in the waters of baptism and in the bread and wine of Holy Communion.

Our lives are changed. We are filled with joy. We praise and glorify God for what God has done for us in Jesus. Even for the criminal on the cross, in his agony, there was a sense of joy at the promise of being in paradise with Jesus. We are the people God has saved through Jesus. Who cannot rejoice over that promise?

The presence of a baby brings changes to one's life. Just ask anyone who has given birth or adopted an infant. Those tiny people demand our attention. Our own wants and desires take second place to their needs.

The birth of Jesus demanded the attention of not only his parents, but the bright angels in a dark sky certainly got the attention of shepherds in the field in Luke's account. They come and worship Jesus and go back home changed people.

A bright star in the east got the attention of magi in Matthew's account. They come and worship Jesus and go back home changed people.

These shepherds and foreign fortune-tellers were willing to bow down and worship this child. They were willing to give up a bit of their own lives for the sake of this miracle baby. He became more important than their sheep or their homelands. They have to come to see and worship this new-born king.

In contrast, when Herod hears about the birth of a new king from the magi, he does whatever he can to try and save his own life. He will seek to kill the infant Jesus rather than worship him and change his life because of him.

There can be a danger that Christmas ends up meaning nothing more than a baby in a manger in the Bethlehem over 2000 years ago. Christmas is about God coming to each of us today in Jesus, bringing salvation to us; bringing God's promises to us – which God will certainly keep.

Christmas is more about celebrating our lives with God here and now than a particular event back in history. That's what the gospel writers centered on, not the birth. That's what the letter writers write about, not the birth.

That birth so long ago is important for the ways it changes our lives today.

⁶ Luke 2:20