

Christmas Day
December 25, 2008
St. David's

It just may be the world's most well known story. Even for people of other religious traditions, it is all but impossible to not know the event that we celebrate this morning in some detail. For those of us who grew up as Christians, we may even know the particulars of this birth better than we do our own, even though the Gospels are very skimpy with the details.

Knowing such an important narrative so intimately is a wonderful thing. But familiarity comes with its own issues. First, because we can tell the story by heart, we subconsciously turn it off when we hear it again. This is even more true in this post-modern world of constant streaming information and overlapping soundbites. Second, familiarity with any story, as well as the time and distance we are from the original event, leads to domestication of content.

I think we can see good illustrations of this kind of domestication and falsely nostalgic view of the past, even in the span of our own lifetimes. For example, those of you old enough to remember the 1950's know that the real Fonzies were not nearly the warm characters portrayed by Henry Winkler in Happy Days. For the most part, those guys were bullies. You also know that family life was not anything like the eternally blissful household seen in Father Knows Best.

I have noticed a similar domestication of the past, even looking at something as recent as Martin Luther King's *I have a dream* speech. That was only 40 years ago, but

already I have noticed that youngsters are now hearing that speech as a heartwarming nostalgic piece of Americana. Of course, in reality, there was nothing heartwarming about it. What Dr. King was doing was indicting America and challenging it to change the horrid conditions that existed in this country for African Americans. We have already domesticated the *I have a dream* speech, and in the process we lost much of what Rev. King was trying to teach us.

I would argue that the same thing has happened to the story of the birth of Jesus, except to a much greater extent. We have taken a narrative that scandalized and outraged first century hearers and reduced it to... warm and fuzzy. Whether we are talking about the cosmic view of Christ's birth in today's prologue from the Gospel of John, or the more personal tale that we heard last night in the Gospel of Luke with the shepherds, or the Matthean version with the Three Kings, we have domesticated all of our Biblical Christmas stories into such a nostalgic tale that it has lost virtually all of its meaning.

I feel certain that the authors of John, Matthew and Luke would all be horrified with what we have done to their three very different accounts of the birth of Jesus. To begin with, it is difficult for us to now relate to just how edgy this tale was in its time. The idea of incarnation, of the word becoming flesh, as John puts it today, was profoundly disturbing to virtually everyone in the first century world. In every religious tradition of the day, God was known as a far away entity that would never think of associating with lowly humans in anything but the most distant way. Only in Judaism was there the

faintest suggestion that humans could somehow be intimate with God. And even for most Jews, the idea that God would become incarnated in such a commonplace fashion, was enough to eventually ostracize Christians from the rest of the Jewish community. For those outside of Judaism, such a suggestion was beyond distasteful. It was downright sacrilegious. That's why to this day Muslims are offended by any attempt to depict God.

The idea of incarnation was awful enough by itself, but the images that Matthew and Luke portray of this in-breaking of God on humanity were even more sordid. Not only do they suggest that God becomes human, but they have this God born into abject poverty, delivered by an unwed teenage girl, who not only was poor, but outcast from society. To increase the humiliation, Jesus is born in a barn, uninvited into the world, abandoned and rejected by everyone.

Luke also tells us that the only people who are given notice of this birth are shepherds. We miss Luke's message today when we romantically envision a Navajo shepherd on the pages of Arizona Highways. As any real Navajo shepherd of today will tell you, it's not an easy life. But beyond that, shepherds in Jesus's time were also outcasts from society. Their occupation made them unclean. There is nothing soft and cushy in either Matthew or Luke's version of this birth. These are stories of a baby born into nothingness. Today's text from John is even more carnal. He suggests that Divine Wisdom itself becomes manifest in a human being. It is difficult to imagine anything more sacrilegious to anyone in the first century. That's why Christianity was so difficult

for anyone to originally accept.

The Nativity as portrayed in the Gospels is a birth beyond insignificance. The news is only carried by people who are not allowed to participate in society. It is so insignificant, that the birth was not recorded. No one knew who Jesus was, and no one cared. In the first gospel that was written, the Gospel of Mark, the author knows nothing of Jesus' birth. He begins the story with Jesus' baptism. It is only later, much later, well after Jesus' death, that people begin to realize the significance of his life.

If we are going to understand the magnitude of Christmas 2008, we must recapture the scandal of the Nativity. Christmas is the story of a God no one had ever experienced before in history. It is the story of a God who can be intimately known. It is the story of a God who cares about us so much that God became one of us. This God is so involved in our lives, that this God chose to experience everything we do, poverty, pain, rejection. God was born into the most humiliating of circumstances so that God could become one with us and understand our pain and suffering, fully and completely. For many, this is a disgraceful way to see God. But for me, this true Christmas story is what has allowed me to experience God in a real and palpable way. The power of the Christmas story is that God meets us on our level, that God is right here with us, in the muck and sludge of our lives. It is very simply, the reason I choose to be Christian.

When we are able to understand what Matthew, Luke and John are really telling us, it can change everything. If God was willing to come into the world in total obscurity in the most degrading of circumstances, and is then recognized by John as the cosmic

light that darkness could not overcome, this tells us the most critical factor about the nature of the universe. From the most insignificant of things, the world can be changed. From a tiny baby born into poverty, will come the world's deliverance.

Suddenly, we are informed about our own lives. The most difficult questions now have answers. The world's problems are too big, it's all too much, we say. How can I make a difference? But Jesus comes to show us by example that no matter how insignificant we think we are, no matter how little impact we think we can have, we can do it. *We can change everything. We can light the world.*

It is the most powerful message ever. Do not abandon it for a Currier and Ives tale. Let the scandal of the real Nativity change you, so that you too may bring the light to the world that the darkness can never overcome. Amen.