

Don't Worship the Story!
Christmas Eve, 2011

Luke 2:1-20

This week, as I have been reading, or I guess I should say re-reading, Luke's account of the birth of Jesus, I've found myself needing to put together some kind of a disclaimer. The draft version goes something like this:

Concerning the birth of Jesus! If you are expecting to hear a message about a beautiful, pregnant young white girl, wearing a mystical blue dress, travelling gracefully on a donkey to Bethlehem, where an inn keeper offers a stable as all the rooms are taken, where Mary quietly gives birth to a little boy who never cries and wears a shining halo, with beautiful winged angels singing soft lullabies in the background, clean-shaven shepherds bringing a new born lamb as a gift for the baby, donkeys looking on lovingly, in a freshly swept, squeaky clean room with a Christmas tree in the corner, and snow falling outside ...then you may be disappointed.

When it comes to the birth of Jesus, and what we read in the Bible, I find myself wanting to say, "Handle with care!"

Handle with care, because we otherwise end up with a Christmas event which is almost completely divorced from what really happened!

And, if I say something like that, I think it would be only natural for you to say: OK; so what did happen then?

So, I want us to think for a few minutes about what did happen then. And also about what still happens now.

The primary thing that happened at that first Christmas was the involvement of God in human history.

Now in the story that we are all so familiar with, we have Caesar Augustus issuing a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. And we have Joseph and his pregnant wife-to-be, Mary, setting off from Nazareth on the 85 mile trip to Bethlehem. And, by the way, there is no mention anywhere in the scriptures of a donkey that she rode on.

Ladies, I have for you here a free voucher, entitling you to a fully accompanied 85 mile walk, from Greensboro to Raleigh. Basic accommodations will be provided upon your arrival in Raleigh. The only condition is that you have to do the 85 mile walk while you are 8 months pregnant! How does that sound to you?

But, as the old routine of many years ago said, "it's in the book. So now you might be thinking – OK, yes, so Caesar ordered a census, Mary and Joseph travelled to Bethlehem, and next ...came the birth of Jesus.

But what I would like us to do now is stop ...and consider the fact that God brought this event – this sequence of events – into being.

At the time of Jesus' birth, Caesar was considered to be the most powerful man alive. He insisted that people refer to him as 'Lord' and 'Savior'. Interesting, then, that later, the angels should announce that Jesus will be 'Savior' and 'Lord'!

Caesar decides he wants everyone to register – probably for taxation purposes. And God uses this action of a pagan Roman emperor to ensure that Joseph and Mary end up in Bethlehem at just the right time! They were residents of Nazareth 85 miles away, but they had to end up in Bethlehem for the Old Testament prophecy to be fulfilled, that the Messiah, the savior, would be born in Bethlehem.

And we read that Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem because he was a descendant of King David, who himself was born in Bethlehem.

At face value the Roman census is the action of a mighty emperor. But what we see is the involvement of God in human history – God using a census for his higher purposes!

But that was then. What about now?

It may help to think back over events in your life – things that have happened since you moved to your current home, or since you got married, or since you became a parent ...or for some of you, to cast your mind back over what has happened to you since the death of a loved one.

Whether you realize it or not, God has been, and God still is, right there with you, in your circumstances. Just as God was working in the lives of Mary and Joseph to get them to Bethlehem at just the right time, so God has been with you, seeking to be in a relationship with you, and seeking to work his purposes out - through all the emotions of life.

Now we know that not everything that happens to us in life is pleasant, or comfortable or enjoyable. Some are just the opposite. Some we'd even like to forget. But I bet that if you take an honest look back over your life you can see how God has been at work to use even the bad things for his ultimate purpose. I sure can.

And if you don't see it yet, keep looking, honestly looking. You will find it. God is there.

The coming of Jesus reminds us of the involvement of God in human history.

And now to the shepherds! They weren't just 'out in the fields ... keeping watch over their flocks.' They were 'living out in the fields near by.' And as a result of their trade, many Jews would have viewed these shepherds as unclean peasants! Shepherds were often people who had been forced to drop out of respectable society and become outcasts.

But yet, shepherds represent the sort of marginalized people for whom the birth of a liberating Messiah would be good news indeed!

You may not remember Tom Sutherland, but you will probably know something about his story: Several years ago Shiite Muslims in the Middle East held Tom Sutherland captive for over six years. 2,353 days to be precise. He was constantly chained up, and spent most of his time confined to a metal cage. In his speech after his captivity he asked an unforgettable question. He asked, "Do you know what it's like to be in prison? To be held hostage? To be a captive?"

He said, "It's very lonely, and you worry that people will forget you. I felt abandoned. I didn't think anybody even knew I was in prison."

During his imprisonment, Sutherland could hear a radio that the guards had. It was tuned to the BBC World Service, and every day he would listen intently to the news, hoping and praying that he might hear his name ...hoping and praying that the newsreader would talk about him on the air and tell the story of his imprisonment and his innocence.

But his name was never mentioned ...so he assumed that nobody even knew that he was being held hostage. But finally, after 6 years of captivity, Tom Sutherland was released. The U.S. government flew his wife Jean to be re-united with Tom, and of course they were so excited to see each other!

A few days later, they flew home together to San Francisco. As they were getting off the plane, Sutherland was amazed to see that there were lights and television cameras, reporters and people holding signs, and a huge crowd at the airport.

Tom turned to his wife and said, "Jean, look at all these people. There must be a celebrity on the plane with us. Look around and see if you can spot who it is." And Jean said, "Honey, they are all here for you! It's you! This is all for you!"

When his wife told him that, Tom Sutherland started crying and he couldn't stop. He sobbed like a little boy. He couldn't believe it. He said, "I thought everybody had forgotten about me. I didn't think anybody knew I was in captivity. I felt completely abandoned. I didn't think anybody cared. Thank God I was wrong."

The shepherds in the fields near Bethlehem must have felt something like that. Society had cast them out and pushed them down to one of the lowest rungs on the social ladder. They were considered unclean physically and spiritually.

And they must have felt abandoned and forgotten. They must have felt like nobody really cared about them. But then they found out on that special, special night that, thank God, they were wrong. Somebody did care!

The One who counts the most did care! He was there for them! Of all the people on the face of the earth, God's angel appeared to them!

But that was then. What about now?

You may not be an outcast from society, but some of you here tonight may feel marginalized, alone, ignored, and insignificant. And some of you may feel that you are unworthy of God's blessing because of something which you have done or said that you know to be wrong.

And to all of you who feel any of that, God's word comes to you, just as it came to the shepherds, and he says, "a savior has been born to you; he is Christ the Lord." Somebody cares about you. God cares.

The birth of Jesus was not announced to well-to-do religious and political figures. The birth of Jesus was announced to ordinary people then, and the message of Jesus is still relevant to ordinary people now.

So the question for us on this Holy Night is, what is our response to the gift of Jesus? If it was so important that God send his son into the world, to live a human life, and to die upon a cross, and to be raised from death – then how important is it that we do something about it?

Because you see, as beautiful as the story is, The real Christmas is not about stables and shepherds and angels and wise men. Christmas is Emmanuel – God with us. God entering human history as one of us, to offer hope, to offer redemption, to offer life, to offer eternity. He came then, he comes now, to all who will receive him.

Joy To The World. The Lord Is Come!