

Sermon: Treasure All These Words

New North Church, Hingham

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Based on **Micah 5:1-5; Luke 2:1-15**

On the face of it, we don't know very much about the birth of Jesus of Nazareth. The Gospel according to Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham and then segues into Joseph's dream. But nothing about Jesus' actual birth. The Gospel according to Mark tells about the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, Son of God, all grown up and ready for John's baptism. And the Gospel according to John talks about Jesus in an entirely different way. Only Luke gives us an extended description of the birth of Jesus.

He is also the only Gospel writer who tells us why he's writing in the first place. At the outset, he says:

'Since *many* have undertaken to set down an orderly account of the events that have been fulfilled among us, just as they were handed on to us by those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and servants of the word, I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an *orderly* account for you, most excellent Theophilus, so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed' (Luke 1:1-4). So, he's really writing a letter to his friend Theo.

We read Mary's song of praise at last week's candlelight service but did not talk about it. We're bringing it up now for two reasons. First, when Mary says her soul 'magnifies the Lord,' she says it is because God has looked 'with favor on the lowliness of his *slave*,' not *servant* as most translations have it. This change of status from slave to blessed mother of God would certainly disrupt the political status quo for the likes of Augustus and Quirinius, though not immediately.

Secondly, both Elizabeth and Mary – Luke uses the transliterated Hebrew names Elisheva and Mariam – are suspect women. Elizabeth is suspect because she seems to be too old to have children, and Mary has become pregnant too soon. Society's tongue is wagging. And yet both are blessed by God, and Mary returns the blessing with praise.

Luke packs a lot into today's reading. He tells us that it is Joseph who is descended from David. We're told that Joseph and Mary are engaged – not yet married but good enough. Luke is also careful to tell us – twice – that when the baby is born, Mary wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a *manger*. And that itself is a sign.

Raymond E. Brown writes that Luke is interested in the symbolism of the manger. He says the manger is not a sign of poverty but is probably meant to evoke God's complaint against Israel in Isaiah 1:3, in which:

“The ox knows its owner and the donkey knows its owner's manger; but Israel has not known me, and my people has not understood me.”

Luke, says Brown, is proclaiming that, through Jesus, God's people have begun to know the manger of their Lord.¹

But what, in fact, is a *manger*? Recall that Jesus called himself ‘the bread of life.’ Quite simply, a manger is a food trough. Jesus in the manger is both a sign and a symbol.

Finally, Luke points out that there was no place for them in the inn. This could mean the inn was full because of the census, or it could mean that socially there was no place for them. Inns were notoriously sketchy in the first century. But I prefer to think that an inn was no place for the newborn Son of God, and that a manger was an entirely appropriate place for him to be.

Luke's Gospel has deep Jewish roots, and we have to remember that he and the other Gospel writers continually quote Scripture – their Scripture, before it was collected and bound into what we call The Bible.

So, let's talk about Micah. He was active 2700 years or so ago, just a country boy from a village just outside Jerusalem. Micah was one of four contemporary Biblical prophets, the others being Amos, Hosea, and Isaiah. They all proclaimed similar concerns about Assyria and the causes of Judah's predicament.

We heard this passage last week too. If we continue from verse five, Micah says, if the Assyrians come into the land and tread upon the soil, we will escalate the conflict, raise an army, and defeat them.

That is the part that Luke and the song writers overlook. Instead, they focus on Micah's reference to Bethlehem as the birthplace of the one who is to rule in Israel, ‘whose origin is from old, from ancient days,’ which Matthew's genealogy echoes.

Conflict escalation has been a tragic part of the human condition ever since Cain picked up a rock against his brother Abel. In terms of making war, one thing often leads to another. War went from being primarily for defense to a key component of foreign policy. Over time, war became an industry, an indispensable part of a nation's economy.

In the first century, a Roman soldier was the perfect weapon. He carried a dagger, a sword, shield, and armor. Depending on their deployment some carried a bow or cross bow rather than sword and shield. The cavalry supported Rome's legions and they all traveled, camped, and fought together in an orderly fashion. Roman engineers designed and built assault and siege equipment. They built roads and bridges and an empire.

Shakespeare wrote, in a play aptly called *Julius Caesar*, that 'Danger knows full well | That Caesar is more dangerous than he.' Two thousand years later, a Roman centurion would stand no chance against your average Marine stationed in Afghanistan.

This is all just a backdrop to the story Luke tells and which we interpret.

The most important part of today's reading happens *after* Jesus' birth. Luke makes repeated references to the city of David and to shepherds. Micah wrote that the one who is to rule in Israel 'shall stand and *shepherd* his flock by the might of YHWH.' And, 'He shall be the one of peace,' not of the sword or blade or army. For Luke's readers, this could mean only one thing: The Messiah.

The day-to-day realities of being a shepherd are of no interest to Luke. While we tend to think of them as living on the margins of society, humble and poor, in the Bible, shepherds are important characters playing a positive role.

David was a shepherd. Jesus is a shepherd, one who will search all night for one lost sheep. Ultimately, God stands as Israel's shepherd. It's no accident, then, that those who came to witness the birth and proclaim all that had been revealed to them happened to be shepherds. Luke is upholding a long tradition.

He also sets high expectations. To Mary, the angels, and the shepherds, the Messiah's imminent arrival means that everything is changing. Luke weaves Israel's memories of hope and renewal with Mary's experience as an unlikely chosen one to tell a story of how God brings about upheaval in a world in need of change.

Luke's 'orderly account' makes claims about Jesus as a threat to Rome. Interestingly, no one in the story seems to mind that people refer to Jesus as Savior and

Lord. His titles are not the cause of any upheaval. Caesar might never have heard of Jesus. It's the salvation Jesus brings that stirs things up.

In his ministry, Jesus preached the good news to the poor and powerless. He healed the blind and lame. He fed thousands of hungry people. He did not restore land to the landless. He didn't write or change any laws. He showed us instead how to navigate our lives in a world that may or may not recognize the values given us by God. He taught us that those 'who are little among the clans of Judah' can do great things in the name of the shepherd king, a bit at a time, working around the edges, glorifying and praising God.

Amen.

¹ Brown, Raymond E. *Birth of the Messiah; a New Updated Edition - a Commentary on the Infancy Narrative*. Yale University Press, 1999, 418.