

# Bethlehem Revisited

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When I was visiting potential seminaries,  
I spent a day at the School of Theology at Boston University.

It was the school where MLK earned his doctorate.

And even though it's a Methodist school,  
they offered me a free ride.

That, of course, got my attention.

So, as a visitor,  
I sit in on an introduction to the Christian scriptures class  
being taught by Paula Fredriksen, whose work I already admired.

The class is made up of first-year seminarians.

And it is almost the end of the term.  
And it is almost Christmas.

The professor reveals, early on,  
that this is the week they are discussing miracle stories.

With something of an apology,  
she simply says that, as a scholar,  
she just doesn't believe most of the so-called miracle stories  
in the Bible actually ever happened.

Her words spark an eruption.

Chaos ensues.

People take umbrage.  
People take offense.

What they were less willing to take

was the time to hear her out.

Admittedly, it was a hard revelation for some to bear.

It quickly became clear that some people in the room, even as seminarians, had never seriously considered that every word of the Bible might not, in fact, be factual.

In the end, I chose to go to another school, but I have never forgotten how much pain I witnessed in that room that day.

It can be devastating when what we take as true is challenged. When a story we consider somehow sacred or central to our life is cut down to size and, in the process, seems to have nothing left to offer to us.

Such may seem the case for many of us when we sit with the story of the nativity.

What, after all, are we moderns to make of an ancient story of virgin births, choirs of angels, and wise people who follow a star moving in the heavens—all to pay homage to a helpless infant in a feeding trough?

Understandably, many of us have, in our time and turn, thrown out the Baby Jesus along with his bathwater.

To be sure, there is much to critique.

For starters, the gospels are not literal histories. Though that is certainly how many people have read them for centuries.

Neither the first gospel, Mark, or the letters of Paul, which predate the gospels, included any reference to Jesus birth, let alone any mention of miracles associated with his arrival.

But the authors of two of the later gospels—Matthew and Luke—

wanted to firmly establish Jesus' authority in the world.

And, so, they decided,  
in keeping with the custom of the time,  
to give him an extraordinary birth.

After all, powerful people  
(and the gods in some ancient religions)  
needed a good story for how they came into the world.

Being born of a virgin in a cave, though,  
wasn't particularly original or unique.

All the same, the writers of the Gospels of Matthew and Luke  
wanted to set Jesus apart.

And so they created a pair of birth narratives  
that are wholesale additions  
to the earlier plot structure set forth in Mark,  
which both authors clearly worked from in writing their own texts.

Yet, in the end, Matthew and Luke tell two very different stories.

Matthew, writing primarily to a Jewish audience,  
has a genealogy that goes back to Abraham  
to establish Jesus in the line of the King David.

Luke, speaking to a more global, gentile audience,  
takes us all of the way back to Adam—  
as a way of saying that Jesus wasn't born merely  
for the people of one place and time,  
but for all of the people of the earth.

These two birth stories overlap very little.

Matthew's version has the shepherds and the angels.  
Luke's has the three mysterious magi.

It's only in Christmas carols and pageants

that we combine them.

And as lovely as our camel was today,  
camels are never actually mentioned in the gospels.

Some scholars have pointed out that Jesus wasn't born in December,  
since the shepherds would not have been sleeping  
in the fields with their flocks at this time of year.

They would have most likely kept watch in the spring and summer,  
when the small lambs were more vulnerable to prey.

Such splitting of hairs, though, by those  
seeking to prove or disprove this or that element of the story  
so often misses the point of the whole thing.

It's almost certainly the case that a baby named Jesus,  
some two millennia ago,  
entered the world with little notice,  
with no fanfare beyond the sheer relief  
of his nearest and dearest  
that he had survived the ordeal of birth.

There were no breathless reporters standing by,  
as has been the case, more recently, for example,  
waiting for the arrivals of the Queen's offspring.

In whatever way it happened,  
it was most likely as mundane as each of our births—  
and just as miraculous.

While I believe there was an historical figure named Jesus,  
whose life apparently had a dramatic impact on those around him—  
so much so that the world has never been the same—  
as a Unitarian, I don't believe he was God.

He was no more divine than we are, and no less.

I don't know about you,  
but I'm guessing, as was the case with me,  
that there weren't any paparazzi milling about waiting

for you to make your big entrance into the world.

And, yet, each of us was born with promise.

For each birth ushers in a new line of possibility in the world.

Each birth brings into being yet one more person  
who can and will,  
in the living of their life,  
for good or for ill,  
in ways small or grand,  
change this world.  
The question, as always, is how.

Mine is not, admittedly, an orthodox view.

Much of Christianity tells a very different story.

But I choose a story of hope.  
Not in what a single person once did.  
But in what each person can do with the days given them.

I choose a story of hope.  
Not in what one version of God once did in the world.

But in the possibility that emerges  
when we see the divine spark in each and every person,  
and not least ourselves.

May this sacred season of holidays and holy days  
open your heart anew to the mystery and miracle of your being.

And to the possibilities within you, still waiting to be born.

Amen.