

“The Christmas History”

Luke 1:5-7; 2:1-7

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I have chosen for my text this morning two short and representative sections of the Christmas history from the Gospel of Luke. I chose these two readings because they accent the *historical* nature of the narrative of the birth of Jesus Christ. By “historical” I mean what everyone ordinarily means by the term: having to do with events that occurred in the past. I use the word to distinguish it from every form of the view that the account of the birth of Jesus that we are given in the Bible -- in Matthew and in Luke -- is 1) legendary or mythical; 2) is an elaborate and inventive embellishment of a small historical core -- that is, a little bit of the story may be historical but all the supernatural aspects are contrived; or 3) the narrative is a theological interpretation of Jesus’ life after the fact rather than an account of what actually happened, theology in narrative form rather than an account of what someone might have caught on camera had he been on that hillside near Bethlehem the night the angels appeared to announce the Savior’s birth.

The writers of the Gospels lead with their chin. Luke especially takes the risk of historical criticism, but he stands the test admirably. Again and again his historical details have been proved accurate. The Gospel writers make no bones about what they are claiming. They offer the reader any number of avenues by which to discredit their account if, in fact, it can be discredited. They expect to be taken seriously as writers of *history*, as chroniclers of events. This is not *once upon a time*... Quite the contrary, it all began, Luke tells us, when Herod was the King of Judea, with a Jewish priest named Zechariah, who happened to belong to the division of Abijah, who, with his wife Elizabeth, was childless. Jesus himself was born when Augustus was the emperor, when Quirinius was the governor, and during a time when imperial taxation policy contrived to require a young couple from Galilee to make a trip to the Judean village of Bethlehem to be registered. And the narrative continues throughout the Gospels and the Book of Acts in the same vein. For example, Herod’s effort to kill the infant Jesus is precisely what we would expect of that man in the last months of his life. From what we know about him from other sources, Herod was a cruel man made more cruel by the paranoia that afflicted him at the last. My goodness, he had already executed one of his own sons because he feared a coup. It was Augustus himself who said of Herod that he would rather be Herod’s pig than his boy.

And there is more. Roman *political figures are named* -- think of Jesus’ trial before and crucifixion under Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor; but also other Roman governors such as Sergius Paulus, Gallio, Felix, and Festus, concerning whom we have a good deal information from other sources -- as are members of the Jewish priestly and rabbinic aristocracy known to us from other sources; *events are dated* -- think of John the Baptist’s public ministry beginning, we are told “in the fifteenth year of Tiberius Caesar, so probably in the Autumn of AD 27 --; *public events are described* -- think of the death of Herod Agrippa I reported in Acts 12 --; the details of first century life are described, sometimes in detail; *the entire course of Jesus’ life*, from birth to crucifixion and resurrection and ascension, *is set firmly within the chronicle of the history of the first century* in Roman Palestine. The Gospels’ description of Jewish life, of the Pharisees and Sadducees, of the relation between the Jews and the Romans and so much more has been

comprehensively confirmed from independent sources, Greek, Roman, and Jewish. So much of the Gospels' chronicle is subtly confirmed in the histories of the Jewish and Roman historian Josephus. No one can dispute the fact that the writers of the Gospels intend their readers to read their writings as *accounts of what actually happened*. Jesus in the Gospels is a figure of history in the same sense that Herod, Augustus, and Pilate are figures of history, however much he is also a figure who far transcends every other figure of history.

To be sure, we do not have a great deal of corroborative evidence of the details of the Lord's life from other sources, though the four Gospels and the rest of the NT is actually a very large and impressive source of historical confirmation. We have some and some striking corroboration from other sources, but only some. But that is hardly unusual for even historical events of great importance from such long ago days. We would know little to nothing of the nearly ten years of fighting that brought modern day France and Belgium into the Roman empire were it not for Julius Caesar's own narrative of his so-called *Gallic Wars*. And such a thing could be said about a great many ancient events and historical figures about which no one entertains any doubts.

This question of historicity needs to be kept front and center in our day for several reasons. You might think that this is chiefly so because so many doubt that the events described in the New Testament actually happened. We need to mount a defense of the historicity of the Gospel narrative to help people see that the history of the life of Jesus Christ as reported in the Gospels is not only plausible, but, by the canons of historical scholarship, more plausible than the narrative of a great deal of other ancient history concerning the factuality of which few have any serious doubts.

True enough, but that is not what I am about this morning. You can read a book like F.F. Bruce's *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?* for an able treatment of such arguments as may be advanced for the reliability of the history recorded in the New Testament, or a much less popular and much more scholarly presentation of the argument in a book like Richard Bauckham's *Jesus and the Eyewitnesses*. C.S. Lewis in his day knew more of the literature of mythology than anyone else in the world and knew the classical literature as well as anyone else, and it was his judgment that whatever the Gospel narrative was, it *wasn't* mythology; it *wasn't* the legendary embellishment of a historical core; and it *wasn't* a theological interpretation after the fact of a few pieces of ordinary history concerning a figure whose birth was *not* to a virgin mother, was *not* announced by angels, and so on. You read Bruce -- who was an able classical scholar before he turned his attention to the New Testament -- Bauckham or Lewis and you realize that a powerful case can be mounted for confidence in the Gospel narrative as an account of real history. It is astonishing, when you think about it, but it can be said of these narratives that make so many historical assertions, down even to small details, that after these 2,000 years no single assertion has actually been falsified or proved untrue. But you also realize very quickly that learning and intellect have never been the issues in deciding questions of New Testament historicity. Very able and learned scholars believe the Gospel narratives to be real history; other learned men do not.

But my interest this morning is more in dealing with another reason to assert the historicity of the narrative of the Lord's birth. For the historicity of the New Testament's narrative is not only an issue of apologetics -- did these things actually happen and can we rely on the teaching of the

New Testament about Jesus -- but an issue of theology and of faith. To say that Jesus was born of a virgin mother in the days of Caesar Augustus and that his birth was announced to shepherds by angels and a heavenly phenomenon -- the “star” of Matthew chapter 2, the star the magi followed to Bethlehem -- is to put an end to the notion, held nowadays by vast numbers of your fellow countrymen, that Christmas can be true *for you*, but not necessarily true for *everyone*. Baloney! If angels announced the birth of Jesus of Nazareth; if he were born to a mother who had never known a man; if magi from the east came to worship him as an infant, led to him by a star, Jesus is *true* for everyone in the ordinary sense of *true*.

If the Christmas history as reported in Matthew and Luke is a factual, reliable account of what actually happened, then *it is an unanswerable challenge to any and every other world view, any and every other philosophy of life, any and every other religious viewpoint in the world.*

There are many things an increasing number of people in our supposedly sophisticated modern west actually believe. They believe such things because they are treated to a mind-numbing avalanche of propaganda and because nobody ever asks them to examine, to think about, the things they are being told. They believe not only that virtually all crime scene investigators are attractive blonds in their mid to later 20s who carry guns and nab bad guys, they believe not only that everyone is having sex all the time with a variety of partners and that this is fun and causes no harm, they believe not only that true happiness can be achieved without the very hard work of building character, a work that absolutely requires great measures of self-discipline, they also believe that truth itself is what you make of it and, in particular, religious truth. “Truth” has been reduced to opinion, very personal opinion, and so it is possible that what is true for one person is not for another. The Christian faith may be true for us, but it isn’t for Muslims or secularists. This is nothing less than the worship of tolerance making fools of an entire people!

It never ceases to amaze me how far that idea has traveled in the modern western world. We hold it, to be sure, with a massive amount of inconsistency and hypocrisy. We don’t expect our air traffic controllers to be post-modernists who think that all routes lead to Chicago. We don’t expect our bank not to care whether it keeps true accounts of our deposits and expenditures. We don’t even think it irrelevant whether or not Caesar actually fought the Gallic Wars. But somehow our friends and neighbors have actually come to believe that it doesn’t make much difference whether Jesus was born as Luke tells us he was, when Herod was the King of Judea, Augustus the emperor of Rome, and Quirinius was governor of Syria.

We Christians certainly know better. We are happy to admit it. If there were no angels outside of Bethlehem that night, reporting events to the shepherds; if Mary were not in fact a virgin when she gave birth to her firstborn son; if magi from the east did not follow a sign in the heavens to find the baby in Bethlehem, then we have bet on the wrong horse. We would lose all interest in the Christian faith were the Gospel narratives not *true*, true in the good, strong, old-fashioned sense; if the Gospels did not in fact provide an accurate account of what actually happened! We would lose our interest in that story immediately *and rightly so!* If it isn’t true it ceases to be of any importance.

Christianity is not, you see, a message about how people ought to live; a message that could be helpful even if Jesus never lived. People have often claimed that, but it flies in the face of what it

is that Christians actually believe. Christianity is not even the description of the way of salvation, the things we must do in order to be saved, different in its own way from that taught in Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, or in various secular philosophies of life. Christianity, to be sure, *is* an ethical system and it *is* metaphysics, an account of reality and of salvation, but it is not those things *in the first place*. Christianity is first and foremost *good news*, the breathless, the excited proclamation of some absolutely stupendous, wonderful things that *happened* when so and so was the king and so and so was the emperor.

Some of you will have heard of *the parable of the invisible gardener*, first proposed by the British philosopher John Wisdom in the 1940s and then taken up and elaborated by Antony Flew, another British philosopher who lectured in British and American universities and wrote a number of books. Indeed, Flew, until his death in 2010, was famous as being perhaps the best known thinker writing in defense of atheism in the second half of the 20th century. He was a serious thinker, a man whose philosophical sophistication exceeded that of Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens -- the best known of the new crop of writing atheists -- by several orders of magnitude. The parable of the invisible gardener was a staple of Antony Flew's argument for atheism. The parable was developed supposedly to describe the difference between assertions based on faith and assertions based on scientific evidence, reason, and logic. It has been published in many different forms but is always about an "invisible gardener." It runs this way:

"Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, 'Some gardener must tend this plot.' The other disagrees: 'There is no gardener.' So they pitched their tent and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. 'But perhaps he is an invisible gardener.' So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. (For they remember how H.G. Wells' invisible man could be both smelled and touched though he could not be seen.) But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give a cry. Yet still the believer is still not convinced. 'But there *is* a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves.' At last the skeptic despairs, 'But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?'" [This version from John Warwick Montgomery]

You get the point. The skeptic asks, "Where is the evidence for the existence of God?" Because it seems to him that the assertion about God and his existence made by the believer can't be falsified. No lack of evidence is ever enough to disprove the existence of God. Nothing will convince them. Nothing will convince a believer that God is not there no matter that you can't see him or hear him or detect his presence in any other way. But if you can't detect the presence of God, the skeptic asks, isn't that the same thing as saying that there really isn't any evidence for God after all.

Now the high irony of all of this is that the very man who deployed this argument and made it famous, Antony Flew, eventually gave up his atheism and became near the end of his life a deist,

a believer in God. This happens a lot in life. Some of you have perhaps seen the graffito, common to the stalls of university men's rooms, that reads:

“God is dead.” Nietzsche, 1882

“Nietzsche is dead.” God 1900

The point is that God always has the last word and often tweaks the noses of those who are sure they have dispensed with him. Antony Flew devoted his life to the demonstration that there is no personal God, no divine intelligence, only to be forced at the end of his life to admit that the world must have a creator. He accepted that the evidence for the existence of God had overpowered his skepticism. While he did not believe in the God of Christianity, he explained that Aristotle had taught him to follow the evidence where it led him and he had come to believe that modern scientific discoveries had made highly implausible the hypothesis that life as we know it evolved by accident, that the complex, information rich life of the cell was the result of nothing more than time and chance. Apparently, there is more to the case for the reality of this invisible gardener and more evidence for his existence than even Flew himself had long thought.

But, more to the point, the parable utterly fails to deflect the spear point of the Christian challenge. Christians don't begin with an invisible gardener or end with one. What they claim is that the gardener came into his garden, appeared among the people of the world, lived for years as a man among men, proved himself in a variety of ways to be so much more than a mere human being, and when he left the world promised to return in due time. Hardly an invisible gardener! Hardly an imaginary one! Visible, tangible, audible: in every way an historical personage whose words and deeds were recorded for posterity, whose friends and followers spent their lives telling others what they had witnessed of his life, his death, and his resurrection.

It is because the Christmas story *is real history*, history in the sense in which Caesar Augustus was a figure of history, in which Herod and Quirinius were figures of history that it is of such spectacular importance.

We have no difficulty, to be sure, in understanding why people do not believe the Christmas narrative to be history in that ordinary sense of the term. They would say that it must be a myth because such events as it relates -- a virgin birth, angels appearing to shepherds, stars leading magi to a distant destination -- are impossible for modern people to believe. We understand that. However, if the NT did not have in its narrative these remarkable, unusual, supernatural events, no one would doubt its history so chaste as it is, so reliable in every other respect as a chronicle of things that happened. But, of course, what they relate is hardly ordinary, though I think it is fair to claim that an honest assessment of the evidence makes it much more difficult to dispense with this extraordinary account than most people imagine. The New Testament is not, after all, like the mythological literature of the ancient world. The narrative of the birth, life, death, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus is not remotely like the stories of gods and heroes that one finds in the Hindu epics, for example. It is nothing like it. It makes a serious claim to historical truth and offers the sort of evidence that has convinced knowledgeable and highly unwilling skeptics through the ages. Believing in the historicity of Christmas, atheists would like you to believe, is evidence of a weak mind. But, of course, some of the most learned and powerful thinkers in the

world today believe these events to have taken place and believe that the evidence for their historicity is much stronger than the arguments that can be advanced against it.

The far larger problem people have with treating the Christmas history as real history, as a record of what actually happened is the implications of doing so. What if Jesus *were* born of a virgin? What if angels *did* announce his birth to the shepherds outside of Bethlehem? What if a star led magi from the east to the newborn king? Well, if those things actually happened, then God really did enter the world, the God who made the world and everything in it including you and me. God really did come among us to save us from our sins. Jesus Christ really is the savior of the world *and the only savior of the world!* It really is true that

“God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

If the Christmas narrative is real history there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. [Acts 4:12] If Jesus’ birth was as it was reported in Matthew and Luke, it is the case and must be the case that he or she who has the Son has life, but he or she who does not have the Son of God does not have life. [1 John 5:2]

If events unfolded as the Gospels report that that they did, then it is true that the Son of Man came into the world to give his life a ransom for many, that though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich. Here is the real problem. The claims of the New Testament and the Christian faith taught in it are universal and absolute. *That* is the real problem.

If the Christmas story is real history, an account of what actually happened, then Jesus Christ is left alone standing in the field. All other religions -- while they may teach some common truth -- are at bottom and in their distinctive doctrine false and so all philosophies of life that do not begin and end with Jesus Christ. *This* is why people so regularly ignore the powerful evidence for the historicity of the Gospel narratives and *this* is why they sing the carols without reckoning with what they are singing. After all, most of the Christmas carols are simply a recounting of the Christmas *history*. They *want* it to be a myth; they do *not* want it to be history. If they were to confess it history, their lives would have to change root and branch. We understand that; we get that. But we say to them, truth is truth. And if your lives must change, so be it. But we also say, when you understand who Jesus is and what he has done and why he asks for your faith and loyalty, you will be glad, so glad that you began to celebrate Christmas not as a cheery winter holiday, but as one of the greatest things *that ever happened*. In every way your life will change, as it must, but you will be so happy that it did.

Is the Christmas history as unbelievable as many in our elite culture would have you believe? Not if there is a God in heaven who made all things and who made man in his own image. Not if man in his sinful rebellion has alienated himself from God. Not if God is love and hungers for the salvation of his world. Not if a holy and just God could reconcile man to himself only by the impossibly dramatic and world-shaking expedient of the incarnation and the death of God the Son, the Second Person of the Trinity on the cross. Not if the Spirit of God is abroad in the world today calling men and women to live life in communion with the living God.

There is much here to *believe*, to be sure. We cannot see the living Christ at this time. Nor were we ourselves witnesses of his coming into the world long ago. But many others were and a careful record was made of the astonishing things that happened then. And taking all of reality into account, the Christmas history relates just the sort of thing the living God of perfect holiness and perfect justice and infinite love would do for us and for our salvation.

And is it true? And is it true,
This most tremendous tale of all,
Seen in a stained-glass window's hue,
A baby in an ox's stall?
The Maker of the stars and sea
Become a child on earth for me?

No love that in a family dwells,
No caroling in frosty air,
Nor all the steeple-shaking bells
Can with this single truth compare --
That God was man in Palestine
And lives today in bread and wine.

John Betjeman's *Christmas*