

Christmas 2014
Luke 2:1-20
December 24th and 25th, 2014
The Rev. John Forman

In 1990, the space shuttle Discovery carried the Hubble telescope into orbit. Since then, the instrument has captured more than a million images. These images capture light from galaxies, star chambers, planets and star systems; light that has traveled sometimes for billions of years. A few years ago, the telescope captured light from a galaxy more than 13 billion years away. These images are visions of a universe so vast and so awesome that our minds struggle to comprehend.

The universe is just as astounding when we explore smaller aspects. In recent years, physicists have moved beyond molecules and atoms into theories of vibrating strings and membranes of energy in relationship with each other in multiple dimensions. The everyday world that we experience has three dimensions: left and right, up and down, front and back. Scientists now pose the possibility that there are an additional six dimensions that are curled up to such incredibly small sizes that we can't yet see them. Some theorists suggest that the presence of consciousness—of human awareness—helps to explain certain physical properties of our universe. These insights are also visions of a universe so amazing that our minds struggle to comprehend.

Truly, we exist from day to day absolutely washed in the astonishing, from the vast expanse of interstellar space to the curled-up relationships of invisible vibrating filaments. But those don't touch the most awe-inspiring notion. What is more awe-inspiring is this: the Birther God who breathes everything into being, the God who creates everything from star nurseries to energy membranes—*that* God comes to us. As a baby. To us, to us ordinary people, a child is born. We are here in this place tonight because of the very ordinary birth of Jesus of Nazareth—the Christ-child. To recognize the reality of God's presence with us in what has been called the "scandalous character" of Jesus' ordinary birth. To recognize God's presence is to be awe-struck by the exposure of the wondrous, sacramental character of the most banal dimensions of our day-to-day lives. With the glory of the Lord shining around them, is it any wonder that the angels had to say to the terrified shepherds, "Do not be afraid"?

Out in the narthex, you may have already noticed two images of the Nativity: One is an Orthodox triptych from Russia and the other is a small statue from Africa. In a few weeks, the figure of a Christ-child dressed in traditional Purepecha clothing will be placed on the side altar by our friends from Santa Isabela, who are mostly first nations people from Michoacán, Mexico. Spiritually, all three representations are correct. They are spot-on. Historically, all three are incorrect.

Over the years, some parts of the church have confused the *essence* of the Nativity with the *particulars*. Some of us have privileged certain *spiritual* expressions to the point that they have overshadowed *historical* realities. We can be confident, for example, that the historical Jesus, Mary and Joseph were all darker-skinned than they are most often portrayed—certainly, darker than I am. We can be equally confident that the freely given love of God that the Holy Family represents applies to all people. There are more subtle ways that our historical particulars are off, but in the past decade cultural anthropologists and other researchers have provided some helpful corrections. And all truth, as my Jesuit professors would point out, is God’s truth. Greater historical accuracy can inspire still deeper spiritual truth.

Did you ever wonder why no one in Bethlehem made room for Joseph and Mary? Luke doesn’t actually say. Did you ever wonder why only shepherds had any interest in this family? Luke doesn’t say. Luke’s Gospel left information out based on the assumption that the people listening were first century Palestinians who didn’t need to be told, not 21st c. North Americans—who do need to be told. Luke tells us that the family is going to “the city of David called Bethlehem,” because Joseph was “descended from the house and family of David.” First century Palestinians would have quickly caught that not only was Joseph was returning to his home village, where he would have been welcomed by many, but that he was also royalty. Finding shelter would have been quite easy. So how is it that there was no room at the inn?

When 21st c. North Americans hear of an “inn,” we assume that Luke means something like a hotel or a bed-and-breakfast. But Luke’s listener’s would have pictured something very different. Most homes in Bethlehem and the Upper Galilee had only two rooms. One room was exclusively for guests. That room was frequently at the end of

the house highest up a hillside or up on the roof. Consequently, it came to be called “the upper room,” a reference that will show up again later in scripture. The word referring to this guest room is not the same word that refers to a commercial establishment like the one where the Good Samaritan put up the wounded man. There was no room in the upper room, the guest room, for Mary and Joseph because it was already full of guests.

The other room was for family, where the entire family cooked, ate and slept. Typically, the end of the room nearest the door was a few feet lower than the rest of the family room floor. At night, people brought their animals into this part of the room to keep them safe and to provide warmth. Small troughs were cut into the stone or made of wood, and positioned at edge of the living space just above the animals. With a bit of fresh hay, they made rather cozy bassinets for all peasant families, whose babies would have been surrounded by family sleeping on their own straw mats. And so rather than being born into shameful, cold and lonely squalor, Jesus and his family had been invited into the warm space of a gracious host family.

Tradition says that Jesus was born on the very night they arrived in Bethlehem, but scripture says only that while the Holy Family was in Bethlehem, “the time came for her to deliver her child.” Luke’s first century Palestinian listeners would have known that codes of hospitality required that experienced women, including local midwives, should be summoned to care for Mary and the child. Had the village not done so, it would have been a spectacular failure bringing shame to the entire community.

In the unlikely event that the village did fail, however, the shepherds who came would have seen to the family. Luke tells us that the shepherds were terrified by the sight of the angels, as any sensible people would be. What Luke doesn’t tell us is that the shepherds were probably almost as disturbed by the phrase, “to *you* is born this day...” because it implies that they should visit. Shepherds were close to the bottom of the socioeconomic scale and they must have thought, “Surely, the parents of the messiah will reject us!” But the angels calm the shepherds by promising that they would find the child “wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” These are the familiar

practices of peasant families, not the nobility. With that encouragement, the shepherds went on and were welcomed.

After visiting the family, the shepherds left praising God for *all* that they had seen. That means they must have found the family in more than sufficient accommodations and not some drafty, dank barn. Middle Eastern researcher, Dr. Kenneth Bailey, claims that “[i]f, on arrival, [the shepherds] had found a smelly stable, a frightened young mother and a desperate Joseph, they would have said, ‘This is outrageous! Come home with us! Our women will take care of you!’¹” The shepherds would not have left the family where they were if they felt they could offer more suitable hospitality.

Stripping away layers of interpretive mythology does not degrade the nativity story, but opens our beautiful story to enrichment. Updating the historical reality provides evidence of the deep spiritual truth that God comes to ordinary people. Ordinary people of all kinds—ordinary people like you and me. And when ordinary people do their best to receive, that is enough. The birth of Jesus, the Word made flesh, shows us what God created *all of us* to be: carriers of divine love.

Ordinary people from all over the world have allowed that spiritual truth to bloom within them, regardless of the historical reality. And so we are enriched by the variety of depictions of this holy nativity that capture human devotion to the holy. Our experience of the Divine is expanded by crèche scenes with elephants, peacocks or jaguars, by images of Mary and Joseph in kimonos, the Holy Family riding the Nile river, or wise men bringing offerings of a ring, a flute, and a piece of fruit. I have seen all of these! And, yes, even a suspiciously pale Holy Family under a crude, barn-like shed with a straw roof. All these come from the hearts of ordinary people seeking to find a way to see themselves as carriers of God’s love. With all their differences, each expresses this humble truth: that whenever anyone prepares a manger in their heart for the birth of Christ, God once again becomes a child on earth. And the angels once again proclaim, “Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace to those whom God favors!”

¹ Kenneth Bailey, ThD. *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*. Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008.