

A Family Christmas

Cynthia Lapp

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Hyattsville Mennonite Church

Luke 1:39-55

Micah 5:2-5

Our family went to see the Christmas story the other night. It was acted out on the parking lot of the Seventh Day Adventist church in Takoma Park as the audience sat in bleachers. We were reminded several times that we were not watching just any Christmas story; we were seeing the “true Christmas story.”

It was grand. The Roman soldiers entered on real horses, the shepherds had curly horned sheep, three wise ones from the east came on live camels that knelt down so the kings could disembark regally. By the time the Magi arrived at his house, Baby Jesus had grown into a beautiful toddler with a yarmulke. It was true in many ways but some truths were left out and some things seemed incorrect to me.

Mary was a lovely woman, but she sure wasn't a teenager. And Joseph, while clearly devoted to her, looked a bit younger than she. Elizabeth didn't look so very old. I imagine it is hard to get people over 55 to stand, night after night in frigid temperatures, wearing nothing but loose fitting robes and sandals, acting out stories with live animals.

But these small issues aren't really what troubled me. What was more disturbing was the biblical interpretation in this “true Christmas.” Admittedly I only saw this one time but I noticed a few additions and subtractions that surprised me.

Let's start with Mary's song. I love the *magnificat*; we sang a version of it this morning. This revolutionary text has been set to innumerable tunes over the centuries. It has a political message that those in power most often do not want to hear. In the parking lot, Mary spoke a lovely song of God's faithfulness being present throughout the generations. And then she stopped. She stayed with Elizabeth three months and then went home. But Mary's song goes further than just God's faithfulness. It actually speaks about how God is active in the world.

“God scatters the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. God brings down the powerful from their thrones. God lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry and sends the rich away empty.”

This may not be an easy message for the wealthy to hear as they gather in the cold, wearing fur coats, sitting next to heat lamps. But the producers should have saved the sanitizing for the real horse poop left by the Roman

horses instead of the gospel. The part that was left out is what makes most sense to a poor pregnant girl who is in an untenable situation. God is with even her. The part that was left out is what makes us well-to-do folks squirm but keeps us working for justice. We too want to be part of God's action on earth.

Why would this portion be excised? Is it because the production itself is such an expensive extravaganza that it seemed not to fit? Is it because the producers don't want to offend the rich community that they inhabit? Or did they just need to shorten the script a bit and those phrases seem extraneous, not part of the true story of Christmas anyway?

Joseph was valiant in his attempt to get a place for Mary to stay and deliver her baby. He was persistent in his pleas to the innkeeper. He would not give up until they were given the barn for the night. And he was protective; he was not interested in the dirty, goofy shepherds coming close to his new baby and Mary. He tried to keep them away until Mary gave the okay. Joseph's compassion seemed real and his concern genuine. This may not have been his biological son but he was protective all the same.

Of course in retelling the "true" Christmas Story the King James Version must be used so the angels brought "good will toward **men**." Always one for inclusivity, I did take notice that instead of only "Mary pondering these things in her heart," (after the shepherds had come to the stable telling of the angels) Joseph also became more introverted and "Mary and Joseph pondered these things in their hearts," together.

This retelling of the story was no different than the way we tell it in that it mixed the gospel stories. We connect the Luke birth account of the shepherds with the Matthew version and the Magi so that we have a complete telling of the story. Jesus came to bring new understanding and salvation to the common folks (shepherds) as well as the gentiles from outside the tradition (the magi.) This not only helps the story it augments our theological understandings of who Jesus is and who he came to save. Each gospel has its purpose but I was not prepared for the appearance of the gospel of John, which of course has no traditional birth narrative.

In Matthew, Herod asks the visitors from the East what they are looking for and when they tell him that they are looking for the child born as king of the Jews, Herod is quite frightened. To check out this claim, he gathers the Jewish leaders to ask them about this king the magi refer to. In Matthew, it is clear that the chief priests recite the verse we heard from Micah this morning.

But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel,

Luke also portrays the Jews favorably at the birth. Zechariah, the priest, receives a visit from an angel of God to tell him that in his old age he will become a father (to John the Baptist.) When Jesus is taken as an infant to the temple, Simeon and Anna, both devout Jews, are held up as faithful when they recognize this baby as the Messiah.

In the “true Christmas story” the Jewish priests were portrayed as unbelieving and unresponsive to the questions of Herod. They have no idea what these visitors from the east could be talking about. They wash their hands of the question. This is more akin to how the Jewish leaders are portrayed in John, especially in the last chapters of that gospel. To portray the scribes and chief priests this way in the birth narrative is not only biblically incorrect, it is morally wrong. The gospel is not being served if the message of Jesus’ birth is altered to place blame and scorn the Jews.

I was moved as the evening ended with the Matthew 2 passage of the slaughter of the innocents. Herod in his overwhelming fear has all boys under two years of age killed so that the king that has been prophesied will not dethrone him. This graphic picture with Roman soldiers crashing into women with babies and men with swords jumping onto fathers trying to protect their families, took me immediately to contemporary scenes. While there have not been instructions to kill all the babies in Iraq there certainly have been orders to kill those who seem the least bit threatening; even when it is a family fleeing, or people gathered for a wedding. Children and women get caught in the crossfire of war all the time and those casualties are not even counted because they are not soldiers. Ordinary people who die in war don’t really count; it is the soldiers on “our “ side whose deaths we count. The “massacre of the innocents” indeed. As the announcer there said, “This is not a very merry Christmas.”

This was the “true story of Christmas.” Is this really a story to tell our children, with all the violence and political overtones? A poor family with nowhere to stay, in a town under foreign occupation, this is not the warm and simple story of a new baby that we tell our kids. No wonder we have cleaned up the story.

But this sermon is supposed to be about **A Family Christmas**. What does a family Christmas look like? Who are the members of the family?

- Zechariah the priest who sees angels but doesn’t believe.
- Elizabeth his post-menopausal wife who is, curiously, having a baby.
- Mary, Elizabeth’s distant relative, an unwed pregnant teenager who sings of the downfall of the rich.
- Joseph who follows his dreams and takes his pregnant, soon-to-be wife cross-country on a donkey.

Add into the family the shepherds also hearing angels and the wise astrologers from the East also dreaming directions. The whole story seems pretty mystical and unbelievable to adult sensibilities. Maybe it is a family story, one that children can embrace easier than rational adults.

For all the fantasy - or mysticism - there are some very concrete truths here.

- People need a place to stay so they can take care of their children.
- We need each other even if we are different ages, different social classes, and different religions.
- God's ways may change but God is always on the side of justice on the side of those in poverty.
- The family lines are blurry in God's family, blurrier than we are comfortable with. What is socially unacceptable just might be part of God's plan.
- When people have power and are afraid of losing their position, it can lead to disastrous ends.
- In the darkest of times God comes to us in unexpected, illogical ways if we have some patience and a sense of humor.

This Christmas season may we again understand ourselves as a family of faith. May we recommit ourselves to this baby and his less than conventional family.