

In the name of God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Merry Christmas! Sometimes days like Christmas are the hardest to understand and preach on. We get so many mixed signals about what today is about, what it means. Commercials tell us one thing, family traditions tell us another, the Bible something else. Today, instead of talking about what I think Christmas is all about, I want to focus on what Luke thought it was about.

There is a book called *The First Christmas* by Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan that I'd recommend to you all. In it, the authors explore the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. What they claim is that the nativity story is really an overture to the gospel. Many symphonies begin with an overture. The overture summarizes the entire work by giving you hints and nuances of what is to come, and it sets the tone for the rest of the story.

Part of the problem that we've gotten into in the Church is fighting about the Bible. Are the stories true or are they fiction? Was Jesus really born in a manger, or was he born somewhere else? Was Mary really a virgin, or not? Did wise men really come to visit the newborn? We've fallen into a dichotomy where things are either true or false, but are those really the only two options? The authors of that book don't think so, and neither do I, nor does Jesus. Consider how Jesus taught during his ministry- he told parables. Parables are earthly stories with heavenly meanings. No one fights over whether or not there really was a prodigal son. No one says "well, if there wasn't a son who came back to his father, then I'm going to ignore the story and dismiss it." It is a story that in some sense, happened, and continues to happen, but speaks to a larger Truth. Parables are not intended to be historical accounts; even the Bible isn't intended to be a history book.

The idea that the Bible is a diary of what happened is a very modern idea, and certainly not the one Luke had.

After all, think about it- how would Luke be able to write what he did? Luke never met Jesus, he was a friend of Paul, who himself never met Jesus. Luke was written at least 50 years after Jesus lived. Do we really think Luke somehow went around and found those shepherds and asked them what the angels said, did he go and ask Mary about the encounter? How about the fact that no author from that period ever speaks of a census by the Emperor. And why are these stories only in Luke? Mark and John don't mention a single word about the nativity, and Matthew presents a very different picture of the nativity. I'm not trying to disprove the nativity, I'm trying to allow it to function the way Luke intended, as overture.

Parables are so often used because everyone likes the story and no one thinks that it's talking about them. Parables though are often

very subversive, they challenge those in power, and that is the case in the parable of the nativity in Luke. Now I want to make this clear so that you don't report me to the bishop- I do think that Jesus was born to a woman named Mary, I do think that he is the Messiah, I just am not sure that the Bible tells the literal story of his birth. Instead, the Bible tells the more-than-literal Truth, capital T, of his birth.

Look at what we see in the nativity: the role of women is elevated. Mary and Elizabeth have the major roles in Luke. The angel speaks to Mary, not Joseph as in Matthew. The power of the Holy Spirit is seen in Luke, as it moves and orchestrates the events of Jesus' birth. Jesus is clearly seen as a king. In Luke, there are no wise men, that only happens in Matthew; instead, Luke has the shepherds, the poor peasant class, come to worship the newborn king. Doesn't that sound like the rest of the Gospel? Jesus ministers to the poor and the outcast throughout Luke. There's your overture; these notes we hear in the

nativity will show up again. Jesus is called the Messiah at his birth, and will also be the Messiah in his death. Luke is setting up the Gospel with the nativity.

There is another reason to read the nativity as a parable, and that is out of necessity. For Jesus to be taken seriously, he had to have some larger-than-life elements. The Emperor of Rome was called the Son of God. The Emperor was also called the savior of the world, bringer of peace, and Lord. The Emperor was thought to be the son of Apollo, making him the light of the world. The Emperor, also, was born of a virgin. When telling the story of the birth of a heroic figure, there simply were certain elements that had to be in the story in that culture. Like today, horror stories start with “it was a dark and stormy night,” fairy tales begin with “once upon a time,” and in Luke’s time, stories about the birth of savior figures began with virgin births and glorious titles. So if we read the nativity literally, we are forced to believe things

that seem very implausible, but if we read them as parabolic overture, we see that Luke is pointing to the Truth, again, capital T, about Jesus. Jesus is other worldly, he is something special.

So if I'm right, that the nativity is an overture, then how do we have the sounds of the nativity stick with us throughout our life? The theme that I find in our passage this morning is joy. Joy of the birth of a firstborn child. Joy of the birth of the Messiah. Joy in the song of the angels. Joy in the shepherds as they saw their Lord lying in a manger. Joy in Mary's heart as she heard all that was said about her son. Joy in Mary and Joseph, who found a way to remain committed to each other through the difficulties of the circumstances.

CS Lewis said that joy is the "unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction." Joy, as we all know, is often most appreciated in times of hardship; in those times where we are surrounded by adversity, joy shines the brightest. Joy is not the same as

pleasure. Pleasure comes and goes, it doesn't fill us; joy is different. There are two kinds of joy. And neither joy is something you possess. Joy is simply a reminder, a reminder of the grace which is set before us. The first is a sort of ecstatic experience- your team winning a close game, the birth of a child, getting a raise at work. And this is good joy. The other kind of joy though is the joy of the Gospel. It is a joy of being filled, of being at peace, a joy of being grateful.

We see much joy in the birth of Jesus- the joy that the Messiah has come, that things will be redeemed. Christmas is the rebirth of hope in our world, and there is much joy in that. But we all know the story of the Gospel- there will be many fights with Pharisees, there will be run-ins with the government, there will be doubters and naysayers, there will be a crucifixion. But this is a story of joy. And Luke, by putting so much joy into the nativity, sets the tone for the whole of the gospel. The notes of joy found here today are also audible in Nazareth, in

Jerusalem, in Gethsemane, on Golgotha. These notes of joy are found in our lives as well, even if they are faint, even if the noise of the world seems to drown them out.

We have much to be joyful about, and perhaps we also have many things to be sad, frustrated, and depressed about. Joy does not mean that everything is the way you want it. Joy does not take away the pains of loss and trouble. There is joy in being loved by God, there is joy in our Savior Jesus Christ, joy in family, in friends, in having homes and food, in having clean water. Even in the darkest moments of life, there is still joy to be found. For Mary, Joseph and the shepherds, there was much darkness. They were all poor, living under the oppression of Rome. Mary was unwed and just had a baby, which is not the situation she would have chosen. And yet, there was great joy brought to them by Jesus.

Luke reminds us that the story of Jesus is about joy. The joy of redemption, the joy of peace, the joy of our Messiah; and though there will be dark times ahead, joy is still there. It is a reminder that God's joy overshadows the darkness of death, of fear, of injustice, of doubt. Christmas is about rejoicing in this joy. Today is a time to proclaim "joy to the world, the Lord is come!" Let the joy of today be the overture for your life, the theme music that plays in the background, even amidst the low notes of life.

May the first and last words on our lips this Christmas Day, and every day, be that of joy. May God bless us and grant us all a very joyful Christmas. Amen.