

Year A: 2022 Christmas Day

Christmas is a time of memories: new ones made, old ones remembered, revisited, re-interpreted. We've all had a few sad Christmases, and a few especially joyful Christmases, but every year, no matter what, we take time out from all of our usual routines and chores; we bring out the boxes of greenery and dust off the decorations; we give gifts and eat special treats and generally indulge ourselves in a great mid-winter celebration.

Even people who have no particular attachment to Christianity or to church, usually include the birth of Jesus in the traditions. We all sing about angels, shepherds, wise men, a star. Children accept the story as part of the tradition, even if it gets jumbled up with elves and reindeer sometimes. As adults, we are aware that there are all sorts of quibbles about the 'accuracy' and 'reliability' of the story, and some of the embroidery added across the centuries.

There are many very serious and devoted Christians who speak out loudly in opposition to Christmas every year, because, they argue, it's a pagan holiday and its origins go back a long way before the birth of Christ. I don't doubt their sincerity, but I think they have completely missed the point.

Critics argue that the ancient world had other such stories about the miraculous origins of special leaders, including virgin births. The Roman census that took Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem did happen, but exactly when is not clear. Herod did order a slaughter of Hebrew children, but this was a man who murdered his own family so they couldn't plot against him; he did that sort of thing.

Other critics offer good reasons for why the nativity couldn't have happened in December. Some argue vehemently for September, and others for March or April,

but celebrations on or around December 25th go back into our pre-history. The ancients celebrated Yule, the return of light to the world after the winter solstice. The Hebrew festival of Hanukkah, which falls around the same time, celebrates light coming into the world. And many other ancient cultures had celebrations centering around light coming into the world, right about now.

Some argue that the Roman festival of Sol Invictus – the celebration of the light of the sun triumphing over darkness – was invented after the birth of Christ, specifically to suppress the early Christian celebrations. Others argue that it was the other way around, and the birth of Christ was just superimposed on a celebration that was already happening.

Some writers scoff at the idea of shepherds ‘abiding in the fields’ in December. If you live in Fort McMurray, or Manchester, or even here in Equatorial Canada, you wouldn’t want to take your sheep out into the fields just now. Around Bethlehem, however, the climate is quite different, and right about now was a very appropriate time to take them out.

And some critics point to the way our nativity scenes typically jumble shepherds and wise men and animals altogether, at the same time, which is not quite how the story goes. And as the years have gone by, a few extraneous characters – like the elves and the reindeer – have found their way in somehow.

But all of this misses the point. What we are celebrating at this time is that God, the creator of all things arranged the universe and human history around the birth of this child. We live inside a great clock, but God does not. God cannot be constrained by time or space; or he is not God.

Yes, the winter festival existed before the birth of Jesus because that's how God designed it. Our distant ancestors celebrated light coming into the world, and we do too, but we also celebrate the coming of the light in the birth of the Saviour.

For people who want to pick the nativity story apart, there are lots of threads to pull. For those of us who believe that God created everything and has a greater plan, none of that matters. We don't believe that things happen randomly; nor do we believe that stories can only be true if the details are all accurate. Just because the details may have become a little jumbled, that doesn't mean that the story is not true, because the truth of the story doesn't dwell in its details.

John's gospel doesn't say anything about the birth of Jesus, and neither does Mark. Matthew tells the story from Joseph's point of view, and pretty much everything else that we know of the nativity story comes from Luke. And yet, John's gospel sums up perfectly the great truth that Luke tells at length. John just says "And the Word became flesh and lived among us." **That's** the deep truth.

The angels and the shepherds and the wise men and the star may all be frills, and whether they happened something like that, or nothing like that, doesn't matter at all. Christmas celebrates both a point in time and also the greater sweep of God's design in creation. The deep truth contained in the Christmas story, in all of its muddled and jumbled traditions, is quite simply exactly what John says:

"the Word became flesh and lived among us." Hallelujah!

Amen.