

TRINITY NEWS

WEEK 51
December 18, 2022

Advent 4A

Some final Advent thoughts before the “fun” begins!

Each time I read from Matthew’s account of Christ’s birth, I am struck by how different it is from Luke’s. Not only is the story line quite different; the tone and focus of the two narratives couldn’t be more unlike.

Luke is all light, wonder, glory. From the Annunciation to the Visitation, the Nativity to the Adoration of the Shepherds and the Presentation in the Temple, one marvelous event follows another. Archangels appear in all their splendor bearing messages from the Most High, and lesser angels throng the heavens singing choruses of praise. Vibrant and boldly sketched human characters abound: Zechariah, Elizabeth, Simeon and Ana. And at the center of it all, the appealing figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose ‘be it unto me’ sets the whole wonderful process in motion. It is always day, in Luke, even when it is night.

What a contrast we have in Matthew. All is dark, shadowy, ominous. From the first rumors of a scandalous pregnancy, to Angels flitting furtively through dreams to deliver dire

warnings; the mysterious star in the East, the silent comings and goings of the wise men; the midnight confabulations in a troubled Jerusalem, the gold, frankincense and myrrh, the Flight into Egypt and the slaughter of the Holy Innocents, one tense, nerve-wracking moment follows another. The human characters are either shrouded in mystery or sinister: the wise men, the rabbis poring over scripture, and the evil omnipresence of the tyrant Herod. And at the center of it, the confused and stressed-out figure of Joseph, whose intuitive, desperate trust in his dreams saves, but only just, both mother and child from sure destruction. It is always night in Matthew, even when it’s day.

Why this difference? Here’s one possible answer. Given that Luke’s central figure is Mary, and Matthew’s Joseph, one might theorize that gender roles have something to do with it. Think of Mary, the mother, safely tucked away in the patriarchal home, shielded from the outside world, caught up in the network of family relationships. She experiences the event from within, close-up, and is overwhelmed by the wonder of it.

To page 2

From page 1

Joseph, however, the patriarch, responsible for his family's survival in a harsh and cruel environment, is acutely aware of the dangers that threaten them on every side. He has little time to dwell on the wonder of it all as he navigates his little ark through such parlous waters!

That does resonate with me. I think of my own parents, who spent the war as civilian internees in Los Baños, and how the stories they told of those three years were so different. My mother's stories focused on the details of daily life in camp, on relationships, on the brave, or kind, or silly, or funny things friends or even enemies did and said, on the little surprises that brought a bit of joy to the day. One got the impression that even in those circumstances, life was very much worth the effort it took to live it. My father on the other hand, saw it as a time of unrelieved tension, a struggle against frustration and an overwhelming sense of impotence. He had a wife and a widowed mother who depended on him and he was powerless! His stories spoke of danger, of rumors of slaughter, of relentless oppression. Mom and Dad's accounts then, differed in much the same way Luke's (Mary's) and Matthew's (Joseph's) do: hers were bright, his very, very dark. When I spoke about this with my mother years later, she

suggested that it was precisely that complementarity that got them through the war and provided a solid basis for their married life. He kept her from sailing off into La-la land, and she kept him from drowning in despair.

In a similar way, I think, we need these two gospel accounts of the Nativity to complement each other, though these days we probably need to pay much more attention to Matthew's version, simply because our popular culture celebrates, by and large, a "Lucan" Christmas. We like bright lights and singing angels. Most of the popular narrative comes from Luke, and even those elements we do import from Matthew – like the Three Kings – have been largely sanitized. This is all well and good, I suppose – but I do think that for those of us who are serious about our Christianity, it is vitally important not to ignore Matthew's account.

Because Matthew reminds us that the world into which Christ was born, our world, was and is a violent and cruel one. It was and still is a battlefield on which ruthless and savage powers and principalities vie with each other in lethal games of dominance and control, with complete disregard as to who suffers as a consequence. It is a world in which angels hover only at the edges, in dreams, a world of deceit and

To page 3

From page 2

evasion, a world of tyrants and oppression, a world, in short, in which the Herods abound, and the slaughter of Holy Innocents is an almost daily occurrence. In other words, we need Matthew to remind us that the Nativity is not a fairy tale.

And just as importantly, we need Matthew to remind us of the threat this one child posed to these powers and principalities, represented by Herod – how terrified they were of Him and the extent to which they were prepared to go to eliminate Him. And this, in turn, reminds us that the more we grow in Christ, the more like Him we become, the more we too will be perceived as threats to the powers-that-be.

So on, this last Sunday of Advent, let us remember that what we are celebrating next week is the arrival of a Prince of Peace on whom the world immediately declared war, that that war still rages, and that as His followers, we cannot avoid being caught up in it. But also, let us remember that Matthew's message is no less wonderful than Luke's, because Matthew allows us to look Herod in the face and still have hope.

TONIGHT @ 6:30: *Advent Lessons & Carols, 6:30p.m.*

COMING UP:

December 24.

- *Family Service, 4:30p.m.*
- *Midnight Service, 10:00p.m.*

December 25.

- *Christmas Morning, 10:00a.m.*

January 01, Feast of the Holy Name.

- *Eucharist, 7:30a.m. & 9:30a.m.*