

The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord Jesus Christ

December 24, 2020

By the Reverend Stephen Gerth

*Isaiah 9:2–4, 6–7; Psalm 96:1–4, 11–12; Titus 2:11–14; Luke 2:1–20**

In Mark, the earliest of the gospels, the identity of Jesus is revealed at the Jordan, when he is baptized by John, whose voice cried in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.”¹ When Luke and Matthew write, ten to fifteen years later, and independently of each other, Jesus is revealed differently. For Luke and Matthew, Jesus’ conception and birth showed whose child he was. In Matthew, the child to be born is already “Emmanuel, (which means God with us)”². He is to be called in Hebrew, “Yeshua,” that is “Joshua,” and in Greek, “Jesus.”³ I like the explanation of this name given in my annotated Revised Standard Version, “The Hebrew and Aramaic forms of “Jesus” and “*he will save*” are similar. The [meaning] could be suggested by translating [the verse], ‘You shall call his name “Savior” because he will save.’ ”⁴

There’s a straightforward reason why Luke and Matthew’s annunciation and birth narratives are similar but different. Both gospels were shaped by the written sources they shared, generally agreed to be Mark’s Gospel and a document known as the Sayings Source. What they didn’t share were other oral and written stories that were very much a part of the Good News for Christians they knew. Unlike the accounts of Jesus’ ministry, neither Luke nor Matthew in their annunciation and birth narratives mention “known

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *An Adult Christ at Christmas: Essays on the Three Biblical Christmas Stories* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1985),

² Matthew 1:23.

³ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible: New Revised Standard Version with the Apocrypha, An Ecumenical Study Bible*, ed. Michael D. Coogan, 4th ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 1748, n.1.1.

⁴ *The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: Revised Standard Version*, eds. Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, expanded ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 1172, 1:21 n.

witnesses.”⁵ Nowhere in the New Testament does one find, what Raymond Brown called “confirming echoes,”⁶ of these stories.

Tomorrow, Father Smith will have the historic gospel in the Christian West for Christmas Day, the beginning of the Gospel according to John. It’s worth noting that in the Christian East, this is the gospel for Easter Day.⁷

Just as I acknowledge the power and truths of the irreconcilable creation stories at the beginning of Genesis, I’m happy to believe what Luke and Matthew share and to try understand what they mean as they proclaim the Good News to help turn the hearts and minds of us who hear it to Christ.

In Luke and Matthew, Jesus was born Hebrew. In this time, children belonged to the tribe of their father. This meant he was a descendant of David, by adoption and grace.⁸ Both gospels agree that he was not conceived through physical relations. Both agree he was born in Bethlehem. In Matthew, a heavenly messenger reveals the child’s identity to Joseph in a dream, in Luke, to Mary by the angel Gabriel. And his conception and birth are revealed to others in both gospels.

In Matthew, magi—astrologers from Persia—understand the meaning of a new star. They journey to greet the one who will be born “king of the Jews.”⁹ In Luke, the child’s birth was announced to shepherds. They were filled with fear when the glory of the Lord descended on them. The angel said, “Be not afraid . . . I bring you good news of a great joy . . .to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.”¹⁰ Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus literally embodies the people and heritage of Israel.¹¹

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent: Essays on the Gospel Narratives for the Birth of Jesus (Matthew 1 and Luke 1)* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1988), 9.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Massey H. Shepherd, Jr., *The Oxford American Prayer Book Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1950), 97.

⁸ Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent*, 10–11.

⁹ Matthew 2:1–12.

¹⁰ Luke 2:10–11.

¹¹ Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent*, 12–13.

In our lifetimes, there's never been a year like this one. Early this morning, while at the gym on a cross trainer, I listened to Christmas music for the first time since last year—music from Kings College, Cambridge, England. I haven't heard a lot of Christmas music so far. Since March, most of my in-person shopping has been in grocery stores and, in what I still call a drug store, Rite Aid, CVS—stores where one doesn't hear music these days. I was not surprised by my body's reaction to words and music that have been with me all life. At the beginning I needed my towel to blot my eyes as the words and music brought the power of faith and Christmas memories to mind.

I want to say that I think there is not less Christmas in this sacred space today than there was last year. There will not be more Christmas in this church building than there is this year in any future year. The incarnation happened in Bethlehem. Christmas happens with us. It's a celebration of believers. We gather to worship God. All of us embody Christ—perfectly, no. But truly, yes. Our journey in this life is not to Bethlehem but to the New Jerusalem.

My Dad, who died six years ago today, and I were not particularly close as I was growing up. Looking back, really different personalities, as much as anything. I have a younger sister, and she and I, a younger brother. As we got older, I came to realize that my interaction with my father was different and warmer when my brother was around. The three of us seemed to be able, without much effort, to even each other out—to help each other laugh. A goodbye hug and quick kiss from my dad became warmer as we grew older. One of his expressions that comes to my mind often in these pandemic days is this, "I choose to be happy." I am very happy we are together tonight with all who here, all who are watching us, and all who are with us in our hearts. For the moment, I don't have to work hard at to be happy in this place with you. This is Christmas, the Christ Mass.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son,
and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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