

Jesus-Savior

sermon digest

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Luke 1:26-38
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The stories, yes, they are different. They differ from stories we would formulate in the 21st century, and they differ from each other. If you have no appreciation for ancient literature and no place for the beauty of symbolism, you probably have no place for them. And true, there are those who have sought to remake them and turn them into something more palatable to our sensitive or perhaps more accurately, less tolerant tastes. There are those, for example, who have gone to great lengths to set forth in excruciating detail “scientific” evidence for the star of Bethlehem. Identifying it as a comet, falling star or meteor, they locate and time it in such a way as to be irrefutable proof of the legitimacy of the story. And there are others who squeeze everything they can out of the scanty historical puzzle pieces contained in the stories in an effort to make them fit into the broader flow of history. Questions are raised, for example, when Luke indicates that Jesus was born during the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 B.C.E., and then moves on to speak of the great census, which did not occur for another 10 years. Some “historians” go through considerable manipulations to relocate the census or to create a census to fit the story—manipulations which are not necessary and which actually do more to distort than enlighten.

The only two places in scripture where Jesus’ birth is spoken of at all other than Paul’s indication that Jesus was “born of a woman” (Galatians 3:28), Matthew’s and Luke’s stories vary widely from one another—and it’s okay. Theirs are stories told with the experience, suffering and hopes of the Jewish people in mind. Their gospels and thus their birth stories are told with an overriding theme. Matthew is intent on speaking of Jesus’ coming as the fulfillment of Jewish prophecy and five times in the birth story speaks in terms of “this was done to fulfill what had been spoken by the prophet,” usually followed by a direct quote from Hebrew scripture. Luke, in keeping with his attention to the poor and lowly, turns to Hebrew scripture in telling of Jesus’ birth as well; but he does so by making use of passages expressing particular hope for the outcasts of the earth. In similar fashion, Matthew traces Jesus’ lineage from David forward through Solomon and the kings of Judah. Luke, in keeping with his social consciousness, traces Jesus’ lineage from the prophet Nathan, not Solomon and the kings. The location of Jesus’ birth varies. Matthew locates Joseph and Mary’s home in Bethlehem and has no story of a manger. Luke locates their home in Nazareth, and they are compelled by the census to travel to Bethlehem where Jesus is born in a stable. Luke also relates the story of the birth of John and his family connection to Jesus—neither of which seem to be known or alluded to anywhere else in scripture.

The question is: Does it matter? Some would say no and get to work on allegorizing the details. Others have thought differently. Some faced with the inconsistencies have given up their religious faith altogether. Others have dug in their heels and insisted to the death on wholesale literal interpretation. As early as the second century, one church father, bothered by the existence of four gospel accounts, sought to weave them into one. His resulting *Diatessaron* has survived, but I suspect most of us have gone our merry way unaware of its existence. In 1922, the respected Baptist Greek scholar A. T. Robertson published *A Harmony of the Gospels* in an effort to harmonize the inconsistencies and relate the four accounts more closely to one another. Despite the respect his efforts had in their day, continued efforts at harmony have been abandoned in favor of appreciating the peculiar circumstances, emphases, and contributions of each of the writers. At important points their interpretations meet and reinforce one another. At other points they diverge. At some points disagree, thus broadening our interpretation of the mystery that together they acclaim. This great mystery, stated in the words of Paul and in our Covenant of Grace is that “God was in Christ reconciling the world.”

And so it is with Matthew’s and Luke’s stories of Jesus’ birth. Written 40 or 50 years after his death, at points they diverge, seemingly each for their own purposes, and at points they are one. Our purpose as we approach them each year is to be open to the newness toward which they beckon us. Called to an ever-deepening maturity, ours should not be a faith that is so fragile that we insist that we must all walk in lockstep in our interpretation of a mystery that literally blows our minds. We may engage our minds—yes, we may—in recognizing the inconsistencies and seeking out the messages

they were constructed to communicate. We can seek to know everything we can about the history, the culture, the time and circumstance both in the time of Jesus about which they speak and several decades later when the Gospels were finally written. And we can seek to go beneath it all to the message the stories seek to impart.

The Gospels are different. They each in their own way seek to bear witness to the God who has come among us in Christ. Matthew's and Luke's birth stories are different, but they each look back to the experiences of the people Israel with a God of delivering love and forward to the promises that the God who has been faithful in the past will be faithful in the future. In Matthew the heavenly messenger reflects a promise the prophet Isaiah made to a frightened king as the tiny nation of Judah teetered on the brink of extinction. Gesturing perhaps to a pregnant young woman nearby, the prophet assured the king that before her child, who would be named "Immanuel," "God-with-us," were weaned, the threat against Judah would vanish. The promise had no messianic overtones at the time, nor was it used that way elsewhere in Hebrew scripture. But its familiar promise, God-with-us, had kept and would keep the Jewish people in confidence and hope.

Matthew latched onto that sense of confidence, that sense of hope. He told of a young woman who would soon bear a child with that reassuring word: God-with-us. And like Luke, included Gabriel's instruction: "You shall name him Jesus for [Matthew continues] he will save." "You will name him *Yeshua* [God saves] for he will save." Admittedly, both Gospels assume that the child will be born of a virgin, although no other place in scripture asserts that claim. Every point in scripture, however, and I would suggest the reason behind the two birth stories in the first place is the foundational assumption God-in-Christ-with-us and Jesus-Savior.

You, as I, may shy away from too much talk about being saved. You, as I, have seen it terribly twisted into a presumptive, self-righteousness that is far removed from the grace we have encountered in Christ. Our unpleasant associations, however, should not rob us of the joyful discovery the stories of Christmas are designed to convey. They bear witness to unfathomable mystery bearing in its wake the hope, peace, joy and love we anticipate in Advent. Far from a self-righteousness that leaves us to preen ourselves in the glow of our superior theology or lack thereof, it bears witness to one who comes to us in grace and love and opens the door of welcome.

"You will name him *Yeshua*, God saves," the messenger announces to Joseph and to Mary, "for he will save." Jesus' identity and mission, like that of the ancient Moses and his successor, Joshua (*Yeshua*), is the salvation of his people. What we have here is something far more, far different from any inclination any of us might have to draw the lines narrowly around ourselves and our kind. What we have here is a salvation so inclusive that it cannot be confined by our narrow theologies and prejudices. It is a salvation as open and as inclusive as the love of God.

And yes, it is a salvation that includes even me. And I am eternally grateful. Aren't you?