

Edina Morningside Community Church
United Church of Christ
Thursday, December 24, 2015 10pm
Rev. Howard K. Bell
No Room in the Inn

“Biblical scholars, Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, in their book The First Christmas, What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Birth provide an understanding that the Christmas story from The Gospel of Luke and the Christmas Story from the Gospel of Matthew take very different perspectives. Matthew’s gospel is more focused on Joseph, on King Herod and the story of Herod sending the wise ones to find the baby, and on the political circumstances that cause Mary and Joseph to need to flee to Egypt soon after the birth of Jesus. Luke’s gospel is more focused on Mary, and giving voice to those who are lowly, like the shepherds to whom the Angel announces the birth of Jesus.

Matthew tells his Christmas story, in part, through the lens of the wise ones. The wise ones were commissioned by Herod, they had wealth as represented by their gifts. They had position and status.

Luke tells his Christmas story through the lens of the shepherds. As a class, shepherds are even lower in the social order than peasants. They are poor and outcast.

Borg and Crossan also suggest that the Christmas stories can be best understood as “overtures” introducing these core themes that will be developed in each of their gospels. In Luke’s gospel the emphasis is on women and the marginalized. Luke insists that it is the obligation of the rich to care for the poor, the outcasts, and the marginalized.

Our text for tonight says, “*And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.*” Why do you imagine that there was no place for them in the inn? Do you think there were places in the inn or in Bethlehem – other than in a stable – for the religious leaders of the day, for those who had great wealth and could pay the price no matter the cost, and for others who had influence?

I remember as a child or young person, thinking of this story just like the game of musical chairs. Everyone in the circle – while the music is playing – has an equal chance of access to an empty chair when the music stops playing. In the game the leader simply pulls out one chair necessitating a mad scramble to make sure that you are not the one left without a chair. Again, everyone is equal.

Thusly, as a child or young person, I imagined it was also true on that that night when Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem. Since Emperor Augustus decreed that “all the world should be registered” there were many people traveling to Bethlehem – all with an equal chance to find lodging. It was simply misfortune, I imagined, that Mary and Jesus were late arrivals and missed out on the regular lodging.

The simple truth is that Mary and Jesus were more likely discriminated against and treated with injustice. They were outcasts, poor, and a troubled couple – Mary was pregnant without the benefit of marriage. Mary must have already been experiencing early labor pains. They had no influence. They had no one to speak on their behalf. The angels that had appeared to Mary and to Joseph did not seem to make an appearance when they spoke with the innkeeper. All persons were not equal that night in the City of Bethlehem and all persons are not equal today.

How wonderfully the images of Joseph and Mary have been transformed through the telling of the Christmas Story. Maybe this help us see that, in our essence, we are truly no better or no more worthy of God's love than those who are outcasts and treated unjustly in our society today. Maybe the birth of Jesus, this year, will transform us and will transform the images we have for ourselves and for the outcasts. Maybe, the birth of Jesus, this year, will truly allow us to see the wonders of God's love for all of God's people equally.

In our Isaiah text tonight, the prophet Isaiah is prophesying endless peace for the throne of David. "He will establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time onwards and evermore." Oh, how we tonight, still yearn for that endless peace. Oh how, so many, are still deprived of justice and righteousness.

It is good for us, this day – on this Christmas Eve - to remember in our hearts the poor and the outcasts in our country and in our time today. The immigrants, the refugees, the prisoners, the hungry, the homeless, those experiencing racism, and those who are impoverished. Let us not only remember the marginalized as we celebrate tomorrow with our gifts and rich food, let us also commit ourselves to work for justice for all. Jesus was born into the world to challenge the status quo.

Biblical commentator Charles M. Wood says, "...It is well to remember... that it is in Luke's Gospel that Jesus identifies himself as the one "anointed," in the words of Isaiah, "to bring good news to the poor, ... to proclaim release to the captives. "¹

May it be so in our world today as we are transformed by the birth of Jesus in our lives and in our faith community. May we bring good news to the poor. May we bring release to the captives. May we work to establish God's endless peace with justice and righteousness from this time forward and forevermore. May it be so. Amen.

¹ Feasting on the Word: Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary - Feasting on the Word – Year A, Volume 1: Advent through Transfiguration.