

Asking the Right Question

As is often the case on this fourth, and last, Sunday of Advent, the focus of our waiting becomes more sharply concerned with the impending birth of Jesus. While the larger, non-church community in which we live has been playing up the birth of Jesus with the strains of “Silent Night” and “Away in a Manger” and “Joy to the World” since early November, we in the church have held off on this in order to more fully prepare ourselves for the awesome significance of Christmas.

You know, Christmas is a big deal. It’s a really big deal. Our culture has appropriated this big event in order to provide a much needed distraction from the shortening days and colder and colder weather. And indeed that is appropriate as we consider our affirmation that “Jesus is the light of the world,” and “that light shining in the darkness.” But Christmas is a much bigger deal than simply a good full-throated celebration of Jesus’ birthday. A big party it is. Even bigger though is the significance of the history-changing consequence of Jesus’ birth.

Sometimes it helps to know the right question before seeking the answer to it. And sometimes the answers that are out there are answers to questions other than the right question. Christmas is a perfect example of this.

At first blush, “What is Christmas?” is the question that can be inferred from all the hubbub around this season of the year. What is Christmas? Why it’s be best time of year, according to one Christmas song. It’s the time of year when our focus is on the joy that we have in our families and communities. That’s a good answer, of course, unless your family is non-existent or experienced as non-existent. Or even if your family is intact, it may not be filled with joy at this time of the year—or even especially at this time of year. So while Christmas may be the best time of year for some, it certainly is not experienced that way for all.

What is Christmas? Why it’s the time of year to give and receive gifts and presents as expressions of love and care for each other. That’s another good answer that is true for many. But it’s not true for everyone—for those who have little or nothing to give as well as those who feel they have no one from whom a gift is expected or forthcoming.

What is Christmas? It’s a time to take a break from the busyness of the year as the calendar year comes to a close. It’s time to catch your breath after the fall term of school. It’s time to hit the pause button and get recharged for the brand new year that is right around the corner. Well that’s a good answer too unless you’re a shopkeeper or other retailer, or if you work in the travel industry or hospitality industry. In those cases there is no time to put up your feet and sit for a spell or two, because Christmas is among the most hectic times of the year.

These, and others that I’m sure you can think of, are answers to that straightforward question, “What is Christmas?”

What about from our Christian perspective? What is our answer to that question? What is Christmas?

Very strictly speaking we can get some insight from the word *Christmas* itself. It comes from the Old English meaning Christ’s mass. In the world of liturgy and worship, Christmas is the day of worship in which Christ is celebrated—more specifically the birth of Christ—Jesus Christ.

Over time, Jesus and Christ have become synonymous in that to talk about Christ is to talk about Jesus and to talk about Jesus is to talk about Christ. Very literally when we say Christ we're saying the "one who saves." Jesus the Christ is Jesus the-one-who-saves.

So, what's in a name? As it turns out, a lot. And we can find out a whole lot in this introductory story in the first chapter Matthew's gospel—the story of the birth of Jesus according to the testimony of Matthew's gospel.

During the 4 Sundays of Advent this year, our adult Sunday school class has undertaken a study called, "A Clear View of the Birth of Jesus." It's based on part of a book by the late Kenneth E. Bailey entitled, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Intervarsity Press © 2008). Bailey was a New Testament scholar who spent the vast majority of his life living in the Middle East in the very lands where the stories and witness of the bulk of the Bible take place. He approaches the interpretation of the meaning of the stories and events recorded in the pages of scripture by examining them from the perspective of what it is to live in that very culture and setting today. The focus in our Advent study has been to look at the few details we have in the gospels related to the birth of Jesus from this insider view. It has been very interesting and very insightful in gleaning meaning from the words that are so very familiar.

In the class of 2 weeks ago, Bailey takes a close look at the very passage we read from Matthew this morning. I want to focus in on one part of what he said that I think helps us to think about the right question that we should be asking at this time of year and in this annual examination of the stories of Jesus' birth.

Today we're looking at the Matthew perspective on the birth of Jesus. We always save the Luke perspective for Christmas Eve. That's because it's the Luke version that has the details of the trek to Bethlehem by Joseph and Mary, and the placing of the newborn baby Jesus in the manger, and the visit by the shepherds—all good stuff that adds to the magnificence of the Christmas story.

Matthew's perspective has a lot that can be gleaned from it as well. One of the points that Kenneth Bailey makes is that the amount of writing material in the scrolls upon which the gospels were written was limited because of its cost as well as its availability. As a result, every single word counts in the gospels—and indeed in the rest of the Bible as well. The writers would have chosen very carefully what to include and why to include it. So while there are parts of the gospels that seem trivial or uninteresting, that is most likely due to our not figuring out what was behind in including it in the first place—in our failure perhaps to ask the right question.

The 8 verses we read then are jam-packed with meaning. Because our time is limited here as well, I want to focus in on one important point to be gleaned for us today—a point that is more relevant for us than ever.

Undergirding all that we read about Jesus in the Bible is the affirmation that Jesus is the messiah who had been promised by God to God's people across the ages. Jesus is the fulfillment of God's promise of a savior who will free and liberate God's people from oppression and domination.

So at the time of Jesus' birth, the people of God, known as the Jews, were living under occupation by the Roman Empire. There was an intense desire among the Jewish people that the messiah would come and crush their oppressors and restore their kingdom to them.

Matthew reports that when Joseph found out that Mary, to whom was to marry, had become pregnant without his participation, he is troubled, angered, hurt and perplexed. Before he can act on this discomforting situation, one of God's angels appeared to Joseph in a dream.

You know Joseph doesn't have a speaking part in the story. In this drama actions speak louder than words, and it's Joseph's actions that reveal from the get-go that what is happening and about to happen that are hugely significant.

The angel that appears to Joseph clarifies the situation in which Joseph finds himself with his fiancé pregnant as a result of no action on Joseph's part. This angel informs him that Mary is pregnant by the power of God's Holy Spirit. Now remember, words are sparse and so a lot is packed into the words that are used. That Mary is pregnant by the Holy Spirit in and of itself implies that the baby to be born is the promised messiah of God—the one who will deliver God's people from their oppression and domination. As if that's not enough to startle Joseph into awe and wonder, the naming instructions given by the angel are even more startling, "She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." (Mt. 1:21)

This is where Ken Bailey's middle eastern perspective is particularly insightful. He writes, "In Hebrew or Aramaic these words provide a word play that is lost in Greek and English. 'Jesus' in Hebrew is *Yěšûâ* and the verb 'to save' is *yāšā'*. If Hebrew and English are combined in a single sentence, it can be translated, 'His name will be called *Yěšûâ* for he will *yāšā'* his people." (*Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels*, Intervarsity Press, © 2006 by Kenneth E. Bailey, p. 48)

That's all fine and good until we read the additional words in that sentence. "In the birth story the child's name is *Yěšûâ*, Jesus (Savior), and the text affirms that he will *yāšā'*, he will save his people from *their sins*." (*ibid.* p. 50)

That's not the messiah for whom they were waiting. They were waiting and expecting a messiah who would save them from the sins of their oppressors. Don't talk to us about our sins when their sins are so much more in evidence. What is this talk about saving his people from their sins?

Even before Jesus is born, the writer of Matthew is setting the stage for Jesus, a savior with aspirations much much bigger than simply reorienting the balance of power. Jesus is a savior who is to contend with each and every person who has been separated from God by force of political, military, civil, societal, cultural and, yes, by religious powers.

This is good news for sure, but it is unexpected or unanticipated good news. The coming of Jesus is an answer to a question that wasn't even knowingly being asked at the time.

My friends, asking the right question today will open to us the fullness of the meaning of what it is we're celebrating in this coming Christmas season. Who is this Jesus whose coming is celebrated at Christmas? Who is Christ in Christmas?

In our day, this year more than ever perhaps, is a time when we as people of Christian faith are reminded that Jesus saves even us, along with those who seek to wield power over us. Our trust and comfort is in the love of God in Christ.

In the first 3 Sundays of Advent we pointed to the hope that we have in God in the midst of hopelessness and despair. While the prophecies of Isaiah point us toward that hope, the testimony of the New Testament gospels is that that hope is not just for those suffering oppression and domination, but it is for those exercising dominion and power over others.

In this last week of Advent, the dawn of redeeming grace appears on the far eastern horizon. And what a dawn it will be when we come together again to celebrate the nativity.