

To the average mind...it is simply hardly to grasp. To the average Christian mind, we seldom take the time to grasp it. We may accept it. We may believe it. But ironically we seldom take the time to drink in the truth of it. To sound a little bit like Genesis 1, or John at the start of his Gospel account, “In the beginning there were no Christmas trees, blinkiiing lights, or stocking hung with care. In the beginning there was no St. Nicholas, or Santa Clause. No turkey dinner. No hushed silence as even business falls silent. In the beginning, the truth is, there was only worship focussed on the manger story, God and His angels, the responsive shepherds, the jourey of the Magi. In the beginning there was only a governmental, Imperial decree, necessitated obedience, journey to Bethlehem. An innkeeper with no rooms to rent, and then the mercy of the stable as shelter. The cry of a newborn baby. A watchful, worried, protective father, and a weary worn new mother. Poverty. Survival. Faith and obedience. That's the way it was in the beginning.

Almost unnoticed, this mercy of God strong to save His people, His created Ones whether they wanted saving or not. Last week's choir anthem asked the question we tend to forget is at the heart of unfolding history, unfolding time. “How Should A King Come?” If you remember the lyrics...everyone knows! With all the pomp and majesty of a regal parade. The Romans had a phrase for it, they experienced it everytime a victorious army returned to Rome from some distant campaign of conquest. The booty and slaves were part of the exhibition. And of course the might of the Legionairs.

Some things have not changed. The world takes note of the 3 loudest headlines every day. The newscast proclaims the “important” stuff. The world news. Usually disaster on top of disaster with a few scandals thrown in. And we are reminded who is really in charge of things.

It is intriguing that Luke would sit down 33 years or so after the birth of Jesus, to write a letter to someone named Theophilus, who had to be called, even by his friends, your excellency. Time has caused to forget most of what we once knew about him. But he was important enough that Luke wrote him two letters. One to tell the story of Jesus, and to share all the stories Luke had been able to verify, concerning how Jesus affected ordinary people...the sick and diseased whom Jesus healed, the sick at heart, to whom Jesus gave new life, and another category that escapes my ability to define, except to say, they did not respond, they did not believe and they remained for the most part untouched by Him...even when they were healed by Him, physically healed.

The second letter was to share a very very personal experience with Theophilus. Luke had travelled with the apostle Paul, attended him, in and out of prison. Luke testifies in that second letter that he story is not over. That the number of people who believe in Jesus, who call Him Lord and Saviour and the Son of the living God is a growing number. That the gatherings of believers is a gathering of people whose lives have changed direction. People who look for the return of Jesus, and seek to leave the world and its people different from the way they found it, or experinced it prior to their coming to faith. Luke wants Theophilus to know, and anyone else who reads his letters, that Jesus is alive. That there is God's power in that name, and love that is...life changing.

There is a truth we need to remember as we engage the opening words of Luke's Gospel. It is a faithfilled story, faithfully, truthfully, told. Luke is at pains to make the point that the story of Jesus is in Luke's time verifiable. That it stands the acid test of critical examination. That eye witnesses to all of the things he includes in his account are still around. There were people he and anyone else who wanted to, could go and ask. Did that really happen? Did it really happen that way? Why did you never include the wise men from the East in your account? Did they really come all that way and take all that

time just to kneel before Jesus and Mary who held him in her arms, to worship and adore and present gifts worthy of a King, worthy of the adjective divinity, and yet marvelously capable of sacrifice to save? Luke wants us to know his account contains what people saw. He, Luke heard the stories, but he also verified them, talked to people who were really there, who actually saw, who were witnesses.

He wants us to know this doctor Luke, that when we talk about Bethlehem, Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the angels...that he has only included those details after careful investigation. You see, Luke's being a physician means he is a scientist. He knows how to find answers. Cures and treatment then as now, were the results of careful work, asking questions, observing results meticulously. He wants us to know that this account for all its hard to believe detail... like the assumption about God in a world that is harsh, hard and tainted by the evil that men and women do... is not the result of a closed mind, but careful observation. Weighing the facts. Seeing leads to believing. He has tasted the facts. And Luke has found the facts, life altering.

That is why he tells us about the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. That is why he tells us that Joseph considered not going through with his marriage to Mary. That is why he tells us Joseph changed his mind. The story of the birth of Jesus, of the ministry of Jesus, of the crucifixion of Jesus, of the resurrection on the 3rd day is all of a piece...encounters with the Living Loving God, in the real world, in which the Romans rule everywhere that is known to Luke. And before this God who is in Christ, they are powerless to prevent the saving of lives through faith in that very God of very God.

And Luke says it is because of these eye witness accounts uncovered through careful, and I add the word, critical, investigation that he shares what he has come to believe to be the truth. He tells it from the beginning. And that is why he tells us about the birth of Jesus in a Bethlehem stable, probably a dugout more like a cave than a Canadian barn. In fact because he has investigated the beginning of the story he has found out it is not just the birth of Jesus that is attended by angels. Angels as God's direct messengers to mankind were involved in that cousin of his who was, how to put it,...religious, a seeker after God, a proclaimer of salvation, a preacher who baptized people in the river Jordan. Luke says it is all part of the package. That John the baptist was born in this stew of angels and revelation. God invading the experience of human beings, and altering their lives.

It was in Israel I learned that there are actually documents, ancient bits of ancient scrolls that lead us to the conclusion that John the Baptist joined what we would today call, a monastery. He joined the Essenes at Qumran. A hermit living in a community of hermits, seeking to leave the world behind and live for God. And then he left the Essenes, to announce to the world, the need to be saved from sin, to be washed in the waters of new life. And he identified his cousin, Jesus as the one who would lead the way. Luke says the birth of John the Baptist, like Jesus own birth was a miracle of God. He says careful investigation uncovered that John the Baptist's birth was also punctuated by the revelation of God's will through the presence of angels. He even tells us that while John was still in his mother's womb, he leapt at the presence of Jesus in the womb of Mary. Neither of them yet born. Both of them very special agents of God's grace.

And Luke tells Theophilus, we just get to listen in, he tells Theophilus these things are not fables, not dreamed up by the disciples to build a bigger church. He insists that for anyone who wants to investigate, in his times, these details of God's grace toward mankind have the ring of truth. Perhaps even more dramatically, the ring of certainty. We tend to want to hold back. "Let's not get radical we think, or more than that we actually say, "Let's not be radical here. Luke is radical! And he claims what the church has claimed for the best part of 2000 years. Truthfully....you cannot get back beyond a time when these things were said, and known, about the birth of Jesus.

It is a matter of history. The church did not decree that time would be henceforth measured as before Christ, and in the year of our Lord. Some scholar in our own times got the idea that he or she would take faith out of the equation by inventing new terms..BC and CE. Before the Christian Era and the Christian Era itself. The fact is...I do not care which set of initials are used....for the last 2015 years scholars have measured time as before and after this marvelous birth. (Even when they miscalculated and got the math wrong about where to place the year 0 or the year 1.)

Luke tells us it is a matter of history, in the time of Herod the King, that Zechariah was told by the angel Gabriel that he and his wife would have a son...to be named John. Zach had the temerity to ask how can I trust you Gabriel? And the result was the inability to speak until John was born. Luke tells us it is a matter of history that Mary said, "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour. Even modern scholars have been able to verify the decree of Caesar Augustus regarding census. At the time Quirinius was governor of Syria.

Christmas is not just a faith festival. It is a matter of history. Mary and Joseph made the journey to Bethlehem. The baby was born. Joseph gave him the name Jesus...as the angel told him to do. It is a matter of history, the shepherds left their sheep in response to angel song. And they to their dying days, says Luke, insisted "all the things they had seen and heard in Bethlehem were just as they had been told they would be, by the messengers of God, the angels."

Christmas: It is a matter of history!

Let us pray;

Lord God Almighty. Your truth is profound, so much so, we find it hard to believe in spite of the evidence. In spite of Luke's careful testimony. Lord touch our hearts anew. Help us to taste your grace in this next week. To revel in angel song and the words of sheep herders, and to marvel at the desire of the Magi. Grant that we might join them on our knees and find ourselves singing the words, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth (no matter what else is happening) and on the earth peace to men and women and children on whom your favour rests. Amen