

December 25, 2022   How We Got Here?   Matthew 1:18-25

I call it the Christmas Question. How did we get here? How did we arrive at a place where believers gather to worship and sing praises to God, enjoying the fellowship in all its aspects, and the whole world listening to Christmas songs, erecting Christmas trees, wrapping gifts, and celebrating with a feast, and for a very brief time...being also mindful of those who have less than we do, and taking direct personal action to try to include them in every aspect of the festival, from new clothes, to toys, to a family feast? Because we need to understand: the world may not share our values, worship, or embrace our lifestyle, but you cannot deny this: the world or a great part of it is celebrating because it is, Christmas. How did we get here? And what should we make of this...reality. And the one thing I can tell you, having been raised as a child outside the church...my family celebrated Christmas.

We listened to carols on the radio. We decorated the tree. My parents did not have a lot, and I realized as I grew, they went without to make sure we kids, my brother and I, had a very special time at Christmas. And Christmas dinner was always a feast. A turkey. Every vegetable we could grow in the garden was represented on the table. Brussel sprouts to kernel corn, glazed carrots and green peas. The potatoes were mashed and there was always gravy and home made bread and several deserts. And my parents doted on the joy of my brother and I as we were dazzled and amazed by the treasures under

the tree...all of which arrived mysteriously after we were asleep in our beds.

Television came to Port Arthur in 1959, the year I started High School. It became part of the Christmas regimen to watch the specials. Some of those Christmas animations still show at this time of the year. Perry Como had a special Christmas show that always included a pageant about the birth of Jesus. Andy Williams had a Christmas show that included the carols from our hymn book. I learned the harmonies to Silent Night and O Little Town of Bethlehem from those artists, and the orchestras and choruses that were always part of their programs. And they are part of how we got here. And yet that does not do justice to the question.

One of the things I realized when I got to seminary and was involved in ministry as a student to the little rural congregations of Nestleton, Millbrook and Ballyduff, was that there was a far more basic and startlingly real answer to the question. The world of which I was aware, loved and loves Christmas. They may not believe as you and I are certain we do, but they like this season of the year. They wish family and friends, Merry Christmas. How did we get to this lovely island of time where the world goes hushed, and people celebrate ... Christmas?

The answer, I believe lies in the reading I shared with you. Matthew chapter 1:18-25. Matthew clearly liked the story he had heard from Mary and some of the other women,

that concerned the Magi, the wise men who came from the East. But to set that story in a context that was real, he tells us the bare bones of the Bethlehem story which is told in greater detail in Luke's Gospel. As I read Matthew chapter 1:18-25, I am satisfied that Matthew and Luke are on the same page when they share so many of these details. "This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about," says the NIV. "Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise," says the King James translation. What that literally means is 'this is how it came about'. And you have to catch it and take it seriously. This is how, what? came about. "The birth of Jesus Christ! The birth of Jesus who is the Messiah." It is simply marvelous that Matthew writes it that simply. And it set between two portions of his writing, one that we tend to ignore and one that we really like. The story of the Magi amazes us. It really does.

At Amberlea Church in Pickering we participated in the local Santa Clause parade which always ended at The Pickering Town Center, delivering Santa to begin that whole attempt to have Santa hold court and sell photographs of children and adults, as families attempted to immortalize the memories of their young offspring. Our float was a live nativity scene. Everyone on it was an adult. Sometimes the infant Jesus was a doll swaddled in cloth. Sometimes it was a live baby held by its mother. But the detail that I always got emotional over was all the men grew beards to be as true as possible to their concept of the what the person they were portraying should look like. And they would encourage one another. "Don't trim it. They didn't have trimmers in those days!"

I was almost always a shepherd. And I would stop trimming my beard shortly into September to play my part. A group of ladies who were good at sewing made elaborate costumes for the Magi. I was in rags arranged over a basic robe, with a staff I cut out of the bush at the farmhouse.

The other piece of bread this reading is sandwiched between, is the list of begats. In the King James Version it is called “the generations of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” And this family tree, a genealogy, links Jesus to David the King, the writer of the Psalms, and to Abraham, the father of the Jewish people. And therefore to the line of faith that takes its focus as the One God who really is, the living God, the Almighty.

Matthew affirms the story that Luke tells us in much more detail. Mary and Joseph were pledged to be married. It was all arranged. Then she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit. Joseph was going to break it off. He tried to be kind. But an angel appeared to him in a dream and affirmed her claim...the child was of the Holy Spirit. Joseph as “father” in this chosen family is to name the child Jesus, which means “the Lord saves” in Greek. Because this is all about saving people from their sins. And all of this took place to fulfill what the Lord said through the prophet Isaiah. So Joseph took Mary into his home and when the baby was born Joseph gave him the name, that both he and Mary had been told to give...Jesus.

We have every reason to rejoice at the general attitude toward Christmas. It is one more detail that underlines the fact that the celebration of the Christ-feast is bigger than one culture, it is bigger than the influence the church has had in national and international issues. It is bigger than the business that is done around gift giving and buying and selling of food stuff. It is dare I say obvious that only One who is big enough to have such an influence over so many is God Himself! It is nothing short of a miracle that the name of Jesus continues to touch people and lives and society in such a way that “peace on earth” inspires a dream that does focus attention on that man...who was more than just a man. As a Roman soldier was heard to say standing at the foot of the cross...”Surely he was the Son of God!” And of course that man was an officer...a centurion. (Matthew 27:54)

What I am saying is that the answer to the question, “How did we get here?” is complex. But the fact is, that its complexity, has a tendency to affirm in my heart and in my mind, that Christmas may yet prove to be something that can only be really understood...when we admit we are touched by the heart of God. Certainly everything the Bible says about Jesus affirms the claim the Centurion is credited with putting into words. Jesus was the Son of God.

Let us pray;

Lord we thank you for your Son Jesus. And we thank you for the reality of Christmas, and the popularity of the celebration. We thank you for the manner in which it inspires

care for others. Generosity. Kindness. Toy drives and gifts of food. Touch us this day with the love which you have in your heart toward mankind. Cause us to care for those who need us most. In Jesus name we pray. Amen