

Sermon, Dec. 30 2007, First Sunday of Christmas  
Calvary Episcopal Church, Underhill, VT

Readings:

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Psalm 147

Galatians 3:23-25; 4:4-7

John 1:1-18

Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea during the reign of King Herod. Herod is remembered as a builder of cities and the re-builder of the lavish Temple in Jerusalem. But he also had a reputation for destroying people whom he considered a threat. He was ruthless in ruling in his territory. His suspicions and jealousy led to the murder of several of his own children and his first wife Mariamne.

Herod's title, king of the Jews, was granted by the Roman government, but never accepted by the Jewish people. He was not part of the line of the "family of David," but he was thought to be partly of Jewish heritage. Because his royal title was not genuine, Herod was constantly worried about losing his reign.

When Herod heard from the "three wise men," that they were searching for the "newborn king of the Jews," Herod immediately planned to locate the child and have him put to death. He called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of the religious law and asked where this messiah was to be born (Matthew 2: 3). They told Herod as the prophet Isaiah had said, "*in Bethlehem in Judea.*"

So Herod, hearing that there were royal visitors there in Judea looking for the child messiah, called for a private meeting with the wise men and learned what they knew about the birth: the bright star, the jubilant announcement from angels, and word spreading far and wide about the birth. Herod told them, "*Go to Bethlehem and search carefully for the child. And when you find him, come back and tell me so I can go and worship him, as well*" (Matthew 2:8). Herod was lying. He did not want to worship Jesus. He was trying to trick the wise men into revealing the whereabouts of Jesus that he may have him killed. The wise men went on their way, and guided by the star they found Jesus there in Bethlehem. Jesus was thought to be about one or two years old by the time they reached him, they had traveled thousands of miles. Jesus and his parents were living in a house in Bethlehem (Herod country) where they obviously intended to stay for a while. The wise kings of the East gave the Holy family lavish gifts, which probably financed their trip to Egypt and back to Nazareth. After the wise men had gifted and worshipped Jesus they left and were warned by God in a dream not to return to Herod; thank goodness they did not.

Now we reach the story, according to Matthew, chapter 2:13. "The Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream, and an angel told him to "hurry, wake up, and flee to Egypt with the child and his mother, because Herod is going to search for the child and kill him (vs 13). Why Egypt? They would be out of Herod's territory, and there were many colonies of Jews in the major cities of Egypt who would welcome the family, protect them; hide them if necessary, wherever they went.

Herod was furious. He had all the little boys (aged 1-2 years) (the Holy Innocents) in and around Bethlehem rounded up and killed. It was thought to be about

twenty boys. All because Herod misunderstood why Jesus came, (like so many other people), he was convinced that Jesus would take his throne and destroy his royal lifestyle when Jesus could have offered even the ruthless King Herod eternal life.

Herod died only a few years later, while Jesus was still a boy, and his sons who now ruled the divided lands of Judea began their rule with the slaughter of 3,000 influential persons of the region, just to get the people's attention, and perhaps they thought they would weed out this messiah they had heard about.

Once Herod was dead, and things settled down Joseph was once again visited in a dream, the angel said "*take the child and his mother back to Israel*" (vs 22). To be safe, Joseph skirted Judea and took his family to Galilee to live in Nazareth. It so happened that Nazareth sat in the hilly area of Galilee near the great crossroads of caravan trade routes. The people there could be in contact with other people from all over the world. News traveled in and out of the region quickly....a great place for Jesus to grow, and learn, and wonder about the world he was sent to save. And it was from there in Nazareth that Jesus set out to begin his earthly ministry.

My extension of the nativity story this morning sounds more like a docudrama about illegal immigrants and exiles. The holy family was just that. Jesus had to be protected, but at the same time it is obvious that the word about him spread far and wide. We can suppose that the circle of believers became smaller and more distant, but they kept the story alive. For certain, much is missing from the story of Jesus life and times, and much is supposed. The stories of Mary's, Joseph's, and Jesus' flight to Egypt and the visit of the 3 wise kings are recorded only in Matthew's Gospel. Mark doesn't mention the birth of Jesus at all, starting his account of Jesus' life with his baptism and start of his ministry on earth. Luke, being a physician, tells the story as if he is the attending physician, providing the most detail of this awesome occasion. And John discloses Jesus' identity not with the sentimental story of the virgin birth, nope, John gets right to the point writing: "In the beginning the Word already existed...and he came to the very world he created (John 1:1,10).

Now, all this information I've offered you this morning sounds a whole lot more intellectual than the usual "life's story connected to scripture" type sermon I most often preach. Don't be too impressed, I only had to consult one book to research my facts, my favorite Bible. Folks do expect or maybe suppose that their pastor will know all the answers to their theological questions. But that's a little like expecting a family physician to know how to do brain surgery....they would have to do a *bit* of research and practice, practice, practice.

Not too long ago, I was having a colorful street-side conversation with some local fellows. We were standing near St. Thomas's Catholic Church in Underhill Center. One of them said to me, "*hey, you're a preacher, look up there and tell me how tall you think the cross on that steeple is.*" I said, "*well, that's a physics or math question and not a theology question.* I made a guess and of course I was way off. I barely got through my physics and math classes. He, of course, had talked with a roofer who had climbed his way to the steeple and made the measurement, he had done his research, and assumed I knew everything about "church."

In a little less than two days it will be a new year, 2008. Folks are considering their new life resolutions. Don't worry, I'm not going to suggest you make resolutions regarding theological research and study. Actually, your daily life is really all you need

to know and study as you work on your Christian formation. Your favorite bible is your ‘owners manual’ for your formation. Go there for “trouble shooting.”

We who profess to be Christians and wish so fervently to “get it right” are always in the midst of our formation....developing our life in Christ. Our formation is in the air we breathe, in the community we live, and work and love in...its an ongoing conversation with life with Christ at it’s center. “Getting it right” is an ongoing process of continual learning born from questioning (even doubting); continual growth through practicing one’s personal theology (what **you** believe); and a continual deepening in the love of Christ, the way of Christ.

A modern monk has said, “*the secret ingredient to Christian formation, to ongoing conversation of a life in Christ is: daily failure*” (Bro. Mark Brown, SSJE). He said daily failure is a key component of conversion of life. We fall down, we get up, we fall down, we get up. So, let’s get ready to skin our knees, and plunge deeply into life in a new year. A “new light has been poured upon us; may it shine in our lives” (proper for today, pg. 213, Book of Common Prayer). We can do it; we can do it together.

Our’s (Christianity) is a great and mysterious story. There is a great deal to be assumed, and plenty of mystery, surrounding what Christians are all about. But living as one is wonderful, especially the falling down and getting up part. The best way to learn the story about Jesus Christ’s life is to live like him: **just love**, unconditionally. The rest is just facts.

By the way, the cross on top of the steeple at St. Thomas’s is said to be 8 feet tall.

*(Some biblical commentary from the Life Application Bible)*