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A New Nativity. IV. And You Too

(Luke 2:1-14 NRSV) "In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. 2 This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. 3 All went to their own towns to be registered. 4 Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. 5 He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. 6 While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 7 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. 8 In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. 9 Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. 10 But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see--I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: 11 to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. 12 This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." 13 And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 14 "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

During this Advent sermon series, we've been imagining our nativity scenes expanded with some of the other characters that could well be a part of such scenes but usually are not. On the first Sunday of Advent, that long genealogy of Jesus reminded us that we could in fact crowd in around that manger the forty-two generations that Matthew tells us led to Jesus' birth. On the second and third Sundays we considered the angel Gabriel and how he often goes unnamed in our nativity scenes but really should be present, because he is the bearer of the good news to Mary of the birth of Jesus – occasioning her song which continues to remind us of God's desire for justice for all people - and he is the one who told Joseph in a dream that this unlikely thing really was of God and, later, that there would be a people who would take them in when they were forced to flee the terrorism of Herod's evil plans. And while the expansion of our Nativity scenes with those generations and with Gabriel can help us think more deeply about our faith and our God, there are probably some expansions of the scene that really aren't ones we would want to emulate or approve of.

I'm thinking of the outdoor nativity scene I once saw in someone's yard, and oh how I wished I had gotten a picture of it! It had the usual cast of characters – Mary, Joseph, the Baby, plus assorted farm animals and shepherds and wise men. But this particular scene also had some characters in it that you will not find in the Bible: there was Santa Claus, kneeling at the manger. There, too, was the Easter Bunny in among the other livestock. There were also two pilgrims, each holding a turkey. There was even Cupid, holding his bow and quiver of arrows and making the livestock look very nervous. Now, I've looked in vain for references to turkeys in the Bible,¹ but confusion at Christmastime is something we've all encountered. I'm thinking of those fractured Christmas carols sung by children who didn't quite get the words right. You know, like the 1950s child who sang "Deck the Halls with Buddy Holly." Or that climactic mis-heard line of "Hark the Herald Angels Sing" that one child rendered as "With the jelly toast proclaim." Or my personal favorite even though it brings a shudder to my meat-loving appetite: "Sleep in heavenly peas."

When Barbara's and my son Andrew was about four years old, he too had his own confusion about Christmas. It had to do with the song "*Santa Claus is Coming to Town.*" I'm sure you remember its most famous line, quoted by parents everywhere in moments of pre-Christmas frustration: "*He sees you when you're sleeping, he knows when you're awake; he knows when you've been bad or good.... He knows if you've been naughty or nice.... You'd better watch out....*" Barbara and I discovered that evidently Andrew had not only been listening to it, but he also had been doing some theological thinking based on this song: one day in early December he announced that he had this Christmas business all figured out: He said, "*Santa watches you at night, and Jesus watches you in the daytime.*"

Now there is obviously a certain theological confusion here, but one that is not unexpected given the culture's insistence that the reason for Christmas is to buy as many

¹This is not one: <http://www.word-detective.com/2008/11/jobs-turkey-poor-as>

things as possible and that the retailers, if not Santa, are watching and prodding you in every way they know how to make sure you get with the program. And yet, on the other hand, if we look at Andrew's statement just a little bit differently, it does remind us of something essential, I think, about the Christmas, something that **should** NOT be lost. And that is this: Andrew's sweet and silly observation about the respective roles of Jesus and Santa expressed in his young life a dawning awareness of something that is indeed very, very important and very, very true. His statement is the beginning of the recognition that there is indeed a **moral order** to the world, that there is indeed good and bad, that our actions do indeed have consequences, and that what we do makes a difference to and affects those who are involved in our lives.

Put much more succinctly, the point is this: **What we do matters**. And whether things are done well or poorly, wisely or foolishly, they are seen, they are noticed, they have an effect – even, my friends, on the very life of God. And so part of what the Christmas story means is that you and I have a **choice** that has been offered to us there in the sign that God has given us of that babe of Bethlehem. We have a **choice, it matters**, whether we contribute to the tender webs of gentleness that are ours to help weave, or whether we tear apart those webs with words and actions that hurt. We have a **choice, it matters**, whether we try to be good people making good choices that contribute to and honor the “peace on earth, goodwill for all.” We have a **choice, it matters**, whether we try to live lives of peaceableness – even when that is so very hard sometimes when it might seem easier (and more satisfying) to give into the “pleasures” of spite.

We have a **choice, it matters** – and make no mistake, our actions and our words are seen, not by Santa, but by the world around us that takes from our words and our behavior what it means to be Christian, and assumes something about God from the way we behave. So indeed, we have a **choice, it matters** – and in the babe of Bethlehem God holds out before us a vision of a world of peace and justice and wholeness – and says,

“come follow me,” says “Peace on earth, goodwill to all.” It is both a lure to us and a challenge to us. There is a line in the Christmas carol “It Came Upon a Midnight Clear” that perfectly captures that lure and challenge of the Christmas story: *“When the new heaven and earth shall **own** the Prince of Peace their King; and the whole world send back the song that now the angels sing.”* Did you catch the verb here? “Shall **own**.” Now in some ways, that’s an odd usage, but in other ways it is absolutely right: because when you “own” something you have truly made it yours and it truly matters to you. It’s the way we use the word when we say that we’re going to “own up” to something we did – we acknowledge it as ours. And that’s where the carol challenges us: to “send back” that song – sending it back into the world with words and actions that offer hope for the hopeless and healing for the hurting.

At the same time, though, we must be careful, for even though the Christmas story reminds us that indeed what we do and think and believe matters and makes a difference, a difference than can indeed be seen by those around us and by God, at the same time we must never ever forget that the coming of God into this world at Christmas is not finally dependent on us or our behavior or our preparations. If it were, then we could not but despair. But maybe another story makes that point better; again, it is from the lips of our son Andrew. A few years after his earlier remark, he made yet another observation about Christmas. After a fight with his sister conducted standing up screaming on the front pew of the church where Barbara was in the middle of preaching a sermon, he was told *“Now you’d better watch out and be good; Santa is watching.”* And Andrew thought for a moment and then said, *“Aw Mom, you know Santa will come whether we’re naughty or nice.”*

This is the truth of Christmas, not about Santa but about **God**. God comes, and is always seeking to come, into our lives whether we are naughty or nice, whether we are good or not-quite-so-good, whether we expressing love or are not very loveable. God

continues to seek us out with the gentle spirit of Jesus Christ when we are caught up in relationships that are troubling, or when our lives are a mess, or when we are mired in grief, or when we are confused, or when we are tempted to put our trust in firepower instead of God's faithfulness, or when we hear those around express hatred and fear of exactly the people that Jesus not only came for but once was Himself. God comes, God comes. Out of love, God seeks – as the Christmas story so powerfully shows – to find us ever and always, to calm our fears, to widen our empathy, to remind us of who our neighbor is.

Put that way, we are confronted with the choice as to whether we too will place ourselves into that expanded Nativity scene, whether we too will worship and pledge our loyalty to the Babe of Bethlehem and the God of unconditional grace He represents – or will we find ourselves standing outside that scene, trusting instead in the powers of violence, giving into the fear of those who are “other,” and thereby denying that that promised peace on earth is possible?

I know where I want to be standing, I know the choice I want to make, I know that with God's help, I too want to kneel at the manger where can be found the Lord of Love.

How about you?