

Merry Christmas! What a fascinating blessing. I've been thinking about what it means to say 'merry Christmas' this last week.

On the one hand, I do hope to have a Christmas full of happiness, and I pray that you have a pleasant Christmas as well. Many parts of this season bring me great happiness. I enjoy celebrating with all of you-I enjoy the chance to sing Christmas songs that have deep resonances with my childhood, I enjoy hearing about other people's Christmas plans, and asking what gifts you are most excited about giving to someone else this year. (I am interested to see how our alternative gift ideas go over, but the gift I'm most excited to be giving is a wooden model of a nose that I found at Plowsharing that you put on your bedside table that holds glasses. I'm giving it to my brother.) Also, I am very much looking forward to spending the next week in Kansas with my family, building memories that I expect will always be treasured for both their joy and sadness.

I hope and pray that you too will have the opportunity to rejoice this Christmas, to celebrate God's presence in the world, Immanuel, God with us, in the person of a small and vulnerable baby.

On the other hand, that simple greeting-Merry Christmas-can also get us into trouble. As we have been talking about so far this advent, the world does not always rejoice at Christmas time, and the season of joy can seem little more than a veneer pasted over the reality of our lives, attempting to cover disappointment, broken relationships, and fears about the future with overconsumption and an orgy of overeating, overbuying, and sentimentality. Wishing someone Merry Christmas doesn't make it so.

Rachel and I went to see an interesting movie last Sunday, it is called "What Would Jesus Buy." I recommend it to you, but it will be hard to get your hands on it, since it isn't at any theaters in Saint Louis that I know about anymore. It's a movie about a traveling protest group-the church of Stop Shopping, led by Reverend Billy. This group staged a cross country tour in 2005 to major consumer culture hotspots like the mall of America in Minnesota, and of course Disneyworld, attempting to spread the gospel of stop shopping and to exorcize the demons of capitalism from our celebration of Christmas. You can find info at www.revilly.com. The movie is pretty irreverent, but it is amusing in a bittersweet kind of way. Its message that we cannot make ourselves happy by pretending that all is well with the world, that we cannot find joy through the consumption of goods resonates with me this Christmas.

This morning, I want to think about this critique celebration we've been working on this advent in relationship to the Christmas story we heard in Matthew this morning.

There are two and only two well developed Christmas stories in the Bible-there is the story in Matthew, and there is the story in Luke. The rest of the Bible is striking in its unconcern for Jesus' birth. Paul mentions Jesus' birth in our Roman's text today, John says "in the beginning was the word" and Mark fails to mention Jesus' birth at all. There

are some early church sources that were left outside of the Biblical text, but these do more to demonstrate how quickly myths can spread around a decisive historical figure than shed light on the nativity. I'll share one story, which I think is pretty amusing. My favorite story from infancy Gospel of James says that after Jesus was born, the midwife who Joseph brought to be there wanted to check to see if Mary was still a virgin. When her hand entered Mary, it burst into flames, only to be cured by the baby Jesus; thus proving conclusively that Joseph had never entered Mary.

Ok, that was all a long way of saying, in terms of information about baby Jesus, we have two primary stories that we can learn from. It is my contention that the best way to learn from these stories is to recognize how tremendously different they are. The Luke story is BY far the most famous one- In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to his own town to register.

4So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.

Our story for this morning is of course the Matthew story, which is very different. You heard the whole story this morning- 1 angel, in a dream, so two people get married but don't have sex, and a baby.

So what do the differences between Luke and Matthew mean? They say very different things about the meaning of Christmas.

In Luke, Christmas-the Birth of Christ- is about the ordinary being proclaimed as extraordinary. It is about normal life magnified and magnificent, about a young mother treasuring in her heart the humble yet miraculous beginnings of a new world order.

In Matthew, the emphasis is entirely different. Matthew is a story about living on the edge-it is a story of cosmic drama where God does just enough, and no more, to save Jesus from his enemies. Its about chaos and crisis, about the powers of the world focused on Bethlehem.

Before the birth in Luke, Mary is blessed and delighted to be the mother of the new king, and she is warned before any of the action begins to take place about what is going to happen to her. Upon learning that she will become pregnant, Mary rejoices in the magnificent, her prophetic hymn of praise which was the primary scripture last week. The birth of Christ is anticipated with joy and expectation.

In Matthew, no one gets a chance to prepare. Mary's pregnancy breaks in unexpectedly. When we come into the story, Mary has already been found to be pregnant. Joseph, naturally, is immediately suspicious that his wife has been unfaithful

and is prepared to send her away quietly (the more civil of his options-he could have had her stoned). The angel in the dream offers enough promises to prevent Joseph from putting Mary away. Nevertheless, I am struck by Joseph's utter lack of comment, either here or later in the proceedings about what happens to his life. It seems begrudging rather than celebratory to me, and the 'he had no union with her bit?' it makes it clear that Mary was a virgin at conception, but it also has a hint of suspicion to it. I wonder if Joseph was impressed enough by his dream vision to do what the angel said, but suspicious enough to have trouble rejoicing over this new and unexpected state of affairs in his life.

The striking differences in detail and tone between the two texts do not end there.

After the birth in Luke, Shepherds come and celebrate the new king, angels rejoice in heaven, the baby Jesus is brought to the temple and sanctified, blessed by old Simon and holy Anna, and the family returns happily to Nazareth afterwards to take up life as usual. God is lavish in offering blessings, celebrating the birth of a divine son, exuberant in the use of angels, wanton in proclaiming the good news.

After the birth in Matthew on the other hand, there is a little celebration-the wise men show up with gifts of gold frankincense and myrrh, but their role in the narrative is more to advance the darkening tone of conflict-the wise men bring gifts, but they also serve to warn Herod of the threat to his power, putting the life of the new Messiah in danger. After the birth of their son, Joseph and Mary abandon their home in Bethlehem forever, having been rendered rootless because they have been swept up in the battle between God and the powers of this world. God breaks in to warn Joseph to escape to Egypt, and they flee to safety by the skin of their teeth, but God's saving power is matched by Herod's brutal actions to destroy the children of Bethlehem.

The classic image of Christmas is the shepherds and wise men, gathered in the manger, celebrating the birth of the new born king, with star above and angel choirs round about. I think it is this image of Christmas that we try to reconstruct for ourselves in our own lives, as we gather friends and family in our homes, sharing gifts with one another, and celebrating the season. We imagine that same holy glow around our own family tables, the star shining over our homes as a place where once again Christ is born anew, where God is found in human hearts.

But I think it is worth remembering that this holy moment is but one of the images we have of Christmas in the Biblical story. This is an image drawn mainly from the book of Luke, with some key characters from Matthew thrown in for balance. But the celebration of the wise men was but a momentary lull in the chaos that had swept up Mary and Joseph and that would leave them off balance for the rest of their lives. That Holy moment did not last, as Jesus grew and lived out his life, aimed at as it was at Calvary.

Maybe the more chaotic Christmas story from Matthew is appropriate this year. There is a war going on, and suffering around the world, there is weeping still in Ramah, and Rachel cries for her children. In this country, the economy looks messy, we are warned about housing bubbles and credit crunches, we face deep political divisions and look forward to a year where hundreds of millions of dollars will be spent on political advertisements vilifying our neighbors of both political parties. We are invited to have a Merry Christmas, but the holiday season also brings to the surface of our lives, memories. Memories of loved ones who are gone, relationships that are imperfect in a host of different ways, and our fears of inadequacy loss.

I wonder how we are supposed to celebrate Christmas in the face of real life. How can this time of year be more than just a veneer, more than an attempt to force our families into the perfect mold, more than a jolly face hiding a broken world.

Can we put Matthew and Luke together without destroying one or the other? Its easy to take one side of the story or the other-we can take all the bite out of Matthew, putting the wise men into our crèches without the threat of Herod or the soon to occur flight to Egypt even dawning on the horizon, glossing over the messy bits of the story. We can take the celebration out of Luke as well, giving up praising God because of the brokenness of creation, and forgoing joy because of the hypocrisy of celebrating when things are broken for our friends and neighbors.

The trick, I think maybe, to the true meaning of Christmas-and the true meaning of Christianity-is holding these things, the joy and the sorrow together. The trick is in celebrating because life is good, but also celebrating in spite of the fact that life is frustrating and hard-celebrating not in denial of our brokenness, but in recognition of the proper place of that brokenness in creation. One of the classic Christmas hymns that we are going to sing at the end of the service today is "Joy to the World." I love this hymn, because it lifts up my spirits even when I am feeling grumpy, and because it always helps me refocus my priorities. It helps me to remember that there is reason to celebrate at Christmas, because in the brokenness of creation, there is God, in the weakness of a baby there is divine power, and in the coldest moments of winter, there will be a spring. But it also invites me to think about what it means to be joyful at Christmas. You see, I don't think that Joy means being happy all the time, or in rejoicing because all is now right with the world or in our hearts and families because Jesus is in our life. Joy doesn't mean being cheerful despite pain or to spite pain. Rather, I hope that joy is being rooted in the love of God that remains with us even at our places of greatest brokenness. Joy is living hope in the face of despair.

One of the most precious Christmas traditions in my family growing up gathering in the little front room of the farmhouse which was the Schrag family homestead. Every Christmas, Grandma Schrag would read the Christmas story-from Luke-to the whole clan, who would gather in Pretty Prairie, Kansas. Afterwards, we would sing, and we

would open presents. Grandma has been dead for about 10 years now, and the extended family no longer gathers on Christmas, there are too many other competing family obligations. Nevertheless, when we do get together at the holidays, often on New Years day or some other time that Christmas week, we still read the Christmas story from Luke, and we remember Grandma and Grandpa, and tell stories of Christmases past. It is not as blissfully and blindly happy a time as it was when I was little, and did not know that generations come and go, that families change and move apart, and that celebration cannot be measured only in presents. Nevertheless, when we sing Joy to the World together, it has more joy in it than ever before.

Also you celebrate the birth of Christ this week-as individuals, families, and entire clans, however you gather, remember the story of Christmas, as told in both Matthew and Luke, remember both the joy and the sorrow, may your hearts be full of the glory of God, the love of the Holy Spirit, and the peace of Christ, and may you have a merry Christmas. Amen