

Problem: There are problems with seeing the Christmas story as a “historical” story.

-I have been pastor here at Our Savior’s for two years now and in this time I have formed a special relationship with Google Maps. Whenever I am going to a church member’s house or meeting a friend of our congregation for the first time and either going to their house or somewhere I have never been, it’s always a fun experiment to see where Google will take me. One time I was going to a church member’s house who lives out in Clinton and drove around to discover that the little “destination icon” was hovering over a road that doesn’t even exist. Now this is a maddening experience if you are already late for coffee with someone, but it’s also very interesting to me how much trust we put into the historical knowledge and research base of Google. Sometimes we have to admit Google will not get us to the place where we expected to be.

-I believe, like finding a destination with Google, the same can be true for scripture. The Book of Luke where our famous Christmas story comes from this evening is a great example. The very first sentence in the Book of Luke states that the writer intends to “write an orderly account for you” Ah yes, an orderly and factual account of Christ’s birth.... I can see the google destination icon already.

-Except there are big problems with Luke’s “facts” as we understand them. Emperor Augustus was never Emperor while King Herod (an important character in Christ’s birth in the Gospel of Luke) was king. In fact we know from other historical writings that Herod died years before the “census” happened under Quininnas (if there was a census, we have no other historical record of one happening). The geography understanding of Luke is also blatantly bad with Jesus and his disciples seeming to use teleport powers in order to “beam” themselves into villages that are according to Luke “on the way to Jerusalem” but in reality are on complete opposite ends of the Palestinian territory. There is also misunderstandings of Jewish custom with Jesus in chapter 17 telling the Samaritan man with Leprosy whom he healed to “show himself to the priests.” A Samaritan would never show himself to the the Jewish priests because a Samaritan was definitely NOT Jewish, so Jesus’ invitation is extremely weird. There are plenty more examples of these types of errors all throughout this gospel.

-If we follow Luke’s telling of this story as strictly “fact driven and researched”, we will without a doubt find ourselves tracking down the Google destination icon that marks an imaginary road. So what do we do if there are factual and chronological problems with the story of Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, and the shepherds?

Solution: The Gospel of Luke was not meant to document a historical moment, but is telling a story of how God is *still* working in our world today.

-Here’s the shift that I hope you can take with me tonight: what if Luke’s orderly account was not meant to tell a story that *happened*, but instead is meaning to tell a story that is *happening*. In my reading Luke’s telling of this story, I don’t see his goal as being to give exact facts and figures to prove that this story took place in history (as, perhaps, a writer in the 21st century would). Instead, it seems Luke is more concerned with beginning a

story that has not ended yet. The orderly account becomes, then, not about facts and figures but of a promise and hope that has not left us.

-You know Christmas in our culture has become so much about “celebrating what has happened.” Just look at a Thomas Kinkade painting and you’ll know what I am talking about. Christmas has become all about celebrating the “times of yore”, remembering our times as kids around the tree, and being in Christmas plays that never happen anymore. There isn’t anything wrong with this, I don’t think, Abby can tell you how much I am sucker for Christmas music and traditions, but if Christmas is all about a memorial about what God *did* once upon a time 2,000 years ago, I’m not sure if I want to have a part of any of that.

-“We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if this eternal birth of the divine Son takes place unceasingly, but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth to his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture? This, then, is the fullness of time: When the Son of Man is begotten in us.” (Meister Eckhart, 1260-1328, German Dominican monk)

-The story of Christmas continues today.

Implication: Where is the baby Jesus being born today?

-Picture of Syrian refugee family. I want you to turn to the back of your bulletins and look at the image printed there. This picture is of a family trying to escape the devastation of Aleppo, Syria and was taken just last week. I acknowledge this photo might bring up some emotions: fear, concern, anger, helplessness. It can be jarring. I also acknowledge we in Missoula, Montana can have no complete concept of what it must be like to live somewhere that is bomb ridden and dangerous. Even so, looking at this photo for me this past week has been powerful. Can God be born in this baby who’s wrapped in cloth with an IV drip? What did God say to this father who’s worried about the safety of his family? How does God fill this mother who is frightened but determined to do the best for her child? Here is a family who is desperate for hope, for peace, and for love. How do we see the story of Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus? Not in some overly romantic painting of the nativity or an absolute factual historical analysis, but in our challenging world today.

-Maybe you yourself are struggling with a life threatening diagnosis, or a loved one who is not doing well. Maybe you are feeling alone or depressed right now, mourning a death, or fearful. Here is the good news: the story is in you too.

-God’s promise, Immanu’el (God with us), is still true in each and everyone of us. We carry tonight that living promise into a world that is dark in many ways. Thank God we don’t always have to rely on historical accuracy, facts, and Google maps for everything. May we continue to celebrate and discover God’s birth in ourselves and God’s hope unfailing in our world today. Amen.