

Christmas Dreams
Rev. Jennifer Gingras
The Monroe Congregational Church
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Luke 2:8-20

I was catching up with an old friend the other day and asked her what she was planning to do on Christmas Eve. Knowing that she usually spends that night with her parents (who always attended their home church), I asked if she would be joining them in a worship service. She quickly answered "No... *I gave up on all the fairy tales long ago!*"

Now, she knew that I was a pastor, which is why she quickly answered "*no offense!*" She must have seen the look on my face, because she quickly added, "*well you don't really believe these things literally happened, do you?*"

Unfortunately, that's where the conversation ended. I wish I had a little more time, but she was late for an appointment.

In terms of "belief" – where too many good, smart, spiritual people are stuck – there are two ways to go. The first is to think like my friend and say '*come on – a virgin conceives, there's a moving star, shepherds, angels, Magi, a long, arduous journey for a pregnant woman carrying God's child – riiigggh. It was a cute story when I was little, but you cannot expect me to believe that today, right?*'

Of course, the other extreme is to say '*yes... absolutely, it really happened that way! If you don't believe it, well you are going to suffer eternally in the fires of hell! Believe it or don't... at the risk of your immortal soul.*'

It's the great Atheist vs. Fundamentalist debate! What a limiting, dull, uninspiring, and unimaginative conversation.

What I want to tell everyone who is stuck in either of those two sides is to consider freeing yourself from the need to believe as the core of your faith.

Rather, seek meaning in stories like this by entering into it, imagining the lives of the characters and their contexts, their struggles and challenges. The truth lies not in whether it really happened that way, but rather what kind of dream or vision the storyteller may be trying to convey.

It helps to flush it out with a little context. Think of it this way...

Long ago, in a Galilee far, far away, Caesar Augustus, believed by most to be a God, a Son of God in the world, the emperor who brought peace through violence, strangely orders all the world to be registered in their hometowns, hometowns he had conquered by applying the Pax Romana, which meant using violence and intimidation and maintaining order by ruling over the people with an iron fist.

Joseph, a man of royal descent leaves his home in Nazareth, in the region of Galilee, and travels to Bethlehem, where scriptures had foretold the birth of a new King - the Messiah - would take place.

Alongside Joseph was his pregnant fiancé Mary, impregnated not by Joseph, but by the Holy Spirit, making the child in her womb The Son of God, a direct challenge to the title used to describe the Emperor.

After an arduous journey, she gives birth to the baby Jesus not in a royal palace, not in a luxurious setting surrounded by attendants and things of luxury as one would expect God would arrive in – as the people were used to - but in a stable, surrounded by animals and straw and dirty blankets. Not unlike Syrian refugee mothers today giving birth in a tent city.

And then somewhere, after the birth, out in the fields lowly shepherds are tending their sheep. Keep in mind that Shepherds were some of the poorest in society –homeless, impoverished nomads – sometimes thieves if the shepherding work dried up.

Yet it is them that the Angel breaks in upon, and announces the birth of the Savior, another title claimed by the Emperor. And the Shepherds go to see the baby... the Messiah, their new Savior, the Prince not of war and violence like the earthly kingdom of Rome, but rather the prince of peace and love... the things of another kingdom... the kingdom of God.

They see the baby Jesus, and I imagine they weep and they hug and they rejoice because they believe the world is about to turn towards Love forever.... they hear the drumbeats of peace and justice now beating in this baby's heart. This little one will blaze a new path into the future – a path paved not with blood and intimidation but with peace and love.

And then they go off, and they tell the story again and again and again with joy in their hearts because their oppression is soon to be lifted for God has come not to the most powerful... but to them. Be not afraid they tell people... be not afraid!

Now, that's a story... and we can live into the message it is trying to convey. And here's the thing about when we live into the experience of the story... it doesn't matter if it is literally true or not.

The intent of Luke was never to tell a literal account of what happened once upon a time, but to tell a story of hope and liberation and love to people who desperately needed to hear it;
a story of a new vision for the world;
a story of Peace over violence;
justice over oppression;
love over hate;
joy over sorrow and grief;
compassion over apathy... that is what this story is really about.

And there is so much power in it... as long as we are able to enter it with fresh eyes and ears and take it out of the realm of belief and put it into the realm of experience.

To me, there is deep, deep truth in it – the kind I wanted to convey to my friend, but didn't quite have the words right then on the tip of my tongue. God breaks into human time in the most unexpected ways. That's what Luke was trying to convey to his people. And that is the message we should take with us – that God will break into your life when you least expect it, in ways you least expect, at a moment when you least expect it.

Incarnation – in other words - didn't just happen once upon a time, in a Galilee far, far way... but it happens all the time. It even happens to you and to me. Perhaps we just need to shed our need to believe and simply open ourselves to the experience in order to see it. Amen.