

One of the things that you might hear in the next few days is some “skeptic,” also known as a “hater” trying to “de-mystify” or even debunk the Christmas story. I have come to think that perhaps the birth narratives might just be more trouble than they’re worth. They do give entirely too much ammunition to the haters, Mark and John don’t mess around with them at all. Historically the birth of Jesus wasn’t really the big holiday that it has become. For much of our history, Easter and Pentecost were the central foci of the Christian year, after all where would we be without the resurrection? Where would we be without the Holy Spirit? But theology doesn’t always have the clout with us humans the way it might, so here we are surrounded by a “holiday” season that is rife with adopted and adapted pagan symbols, which is awash in materialism, which often just seems to make those of us in the religion business over-stressed and cranky. You might take some of what I’m about to say as sort of an exercise in trying to keep my own sanity, just to try and get the story to make a little more sense to me.

The history is tricky and probably doesn’t make for a very good Christmas Eve service, which is why I’m going to do this here and now, so we can get to babies in mangers and a silent night tomorrow, but before I get started I want to encourage you not to worry, I’m not losing my faith, I’m not saying the Bible isn’t true, I’m going to (hopefully) get to a place where Jesus is at the center of this whole thing. I am going to pick a bit of a bone with Luke though. I don’t generally argue with Gospel writers, because I think all of them do something quite well. Mark gets the facts out there like a good newspaper reporter. John gives us some weighty and maybe a little spooky theological ideas. Matthew mostly argues with the Jews, but Luke, with good intention, just tries to put everything together, to include as much as he possibly can. That’s why his Gospel is the longest, and why he also is credited with the single longest book in the New Testament: The Acts of the Apostles. Luke is sometimes credited with being a historian, but in the first couple chapters he’s more like Lin Manuel Miranda, the guy who wrote Hamilton. I mean let’s face it, it’s almost like Luke started writing a musical, rather than a history. How else do you explain the fact that two characters break out into song in the first chapter alone?

Now, I will be the first to tell you that just because something is a poem or a song doesn’t make it less valuable as a means of communication, in fact it often makes it even more potent. My daughter has learned an awful lot about the foundations of this country from Hamilton. But sometimes, in an artistic attempt to tell a good story, things get lost. I’m not saying that Luke lost things, but his account has given us a propensity to focus too much on heavenly choirs of angels and other unlikely things, we can save those for tomorrow night. The thing I want to focus on this morning is the simple fact of people moving around, not the songs, not the foretelling of births, not the prophecies of old, just the simple movement of the people.

First off, let’s talk a little bit about the nature of travel itself in those days. The two greatest things the Roman Empire gave to the places it conquered were water and roads. Even with the wonderful roads the Empire gave them, travel was still a bit of a risky affair. There were robbers and bandits sure, but even the very Empire that built the roads could be a menace. Soldiers were known to extort money from people just trying to get from one place to another, and there were other things that might happen out on the road that are not very pleasant. All this means that people didn’t just journey from one place to another without a pretty good reason. In the story of the birth of Jesus in Luke, Mary goes from Nazareth to Judah to visit Elizabeth and then apparently goes home, and then has to come to Bethlehem, also, consequently in Judah. That’s a lot of travelling for a pregnant girl, and it would not have been something she did by herself.

Add this into the mix too: historians are always puzzled by the fact that Joseph has to go to Bethlehem for the sake of a census. That was not really how the Empire liked to do things, first of all it would have created a nightmare of people moving around on that scale. Second of all, if you think about it, why would the Empire care about the various tribes and houses of Israel? They would not, not even a little bit. They would want Joseph and his household to stay put right in Nazareth and be counted, unless of course Joseph and Mary had some other reason to be away from Nazareth.

This is where things get a little grim, and why this story doesn't really play very well on Christmas Eve. In Middle Eastern cultures to this day the consequences of Mary's situation can be pretty dire. A young girl shows up pregnant, assuming she's not married, both she and someone else are going to be in a bit of jeopardy. They very well might be killed. This is why Matthew goes to some length to explain why Joseph doesn't want to put her in danger, and I think, this is why Luke has Joseph (yeah, I'm guessing Joseph was along for the ride) take this young lady on an extended road trip. If they stay in Nazareth, people are going to ask questions, and even if Joseph is willing to defend his betrothed they might still get pretty upset (remember they did try to throw Jesus off a cliff, apparently Nazarenes could be pretty rough). If they stay in Nazareth, the best case scenario is that Joseph would have to say/confess that he and Mary got a bit ahead of themselves and that the baby is his. According to the Law, this would avert any stoning for either one of them as long as the bride price was paid and the two of them ended up married. Joseph, we are told by Matthew, is a righteous man, and doesn't want to put Mary in harm's way, but he also knows that baby isn't his, so he would have to admit to being dishonorable, and in a small town like Nazareth, that's going to stick. Best case scenario, Jesus grows up with a stigma hanging over him, life would be full of hairy eyeballs for Joseph and Mary. But, if Joseph and his betrothed go away, to her family and his family, they stay away for a while, they get married in his hometown, they come back with a kid, everything is all kosher and nobody has to get stoned.

So here's what I think really went down. Mary's got a bun in the oven, Joseph decides to not only do the right thing, but actually goes above and beyond, he takes her (in haste, I think that's true for sure) to "visit" Elizabeth and Zechariah. Even when they get out of backwards little Nazareth, they're not out of the woods yet. Mary is probably terrified about how her own family is going to receive her. She has probably been in pretty much a constant state of high alert for weeks. She gets to Elizabeth's house and instead of her older cousin giving her what for about being a woman of loose morals, she gets "Blessed are you among women..." No wonder she starts singing a song of glory to God. Every step of this journey is so tenuous.

At some point on this road trip, they end up in Bethlehem, which as Luke says, is the town of David, and the place where Joseph is from, here's where the census thing comes in, Joseph needs to be somewhere he belongs, even if he isn't in Nazareth where he's supposed to be. He's an adult male, and the Romans don't much care what he's doing there, they just want to know where he is and how he's going to pay his taxes. From the inside perspective he was there to give the final stamp of legitimacy to his son Jesus (and yeah to fulfill a bunch of prophecies). From the outside perspective, he was staying with family and that's not going to raise too many questions in the mind of the Empire. In as much as Jesus was going to grow up and live as a Jewish man, this legitimacy in the eyes of the Law was going to be essential, and Joseph was the one who had to give it to him.

So why doesn't Luke tell the story that way? Well, I think it has to do with his audience. Luke's intended audience is much more Greek and Roman than Middle Eastern. The peril and the ominous motivations

that drove Mary and Joseph would have seemed savage to a Greek audience, pretty much in the same way as honor killings do to us. Matthew introduces the peril in the form of Herod, but Luke is sort of trying to smooth things out and make them seem, well, more like a Greek epic: virgin birth, signs and portents, heavenly host, all that. What we might lose in that is the fact that Jesus proves to us that God is willing and able to get involved with us in some very perilous ways. There were a lot of things that could have gone tragically wrong in this story, but they didn't.

That moment between Mary and Elizabeth is not simply a baby kicking at the sound of new voice, it is the way that the Holy Spirit let Mary know that she would be safe. That moment is basically an example of how this thing is going to work, Jesus is always going to move in that way, the kingdom of God is going to operate in that fashion. We need to learn to see and feel what God is doing. This is a key to understanding how amazing it was for God to do what God did, God did not just come as a man, full grown and ready to contend with the world, he came as a baby who needed everything. He didn't come into the world in an ideal situation, he came into a place where the Peril was real. It was up to woman who had thought herself barren and cursed and her puzzled husband to welcome in this young girl, not only without judgment, but with a sense that she was blessed among women.

The Spirit works in these radical ways. The Kingdom of God comes in mysterious ways. God does not wait for everything to be just so, God challenges us to be a part of the plan right where we are. From the beginning, Jesus relies on the remarkable faith of people who are out of their depth, but somehow it works out, somehow it always does, even if it's not a very likely story.