

CELEBRATING CHRISTMAS IN LIGHT OF WHAT WE KNOW OF THE HISTORICAL JESUS

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I am a Unity minister, graduated from a university with Baptist roots, was raised as a Methodist and baptized in a Presbyterian church. One of Unity's foundational statements says, "Unity is a link in the great educational movement inaugurated by Jesus Christ; our objective is to discern the truth in Christianity and prove it. The truth that we teach is not new; neither do we claim special revelations or discovery of new religious principles. Our purpose is to help and teach mankind to use and prove the eternal Truth taught by the Master." (Quote by Charles Fillmore, co-founder of Unity, printed on the title page of all books published by Unity in the early 1900s.) If we say we teach the truth taught by Jesus, that this is the foundation of our work, then it is our responsibility to base our teaching on the best available information as to what these teachings actually were. The Jesus Seminar Fellows have spent years deciphering Jesus' words and teachings, separating out what Jesus said, which sayings were the voices of the gospel writers, which sayings were cultural idioms of the time and which were added by the church and/or scribes diligently copying manuscripts, including the notes written in margins. To pretend every word written in the Gospels is straight from God, or every word placed in the mouth of the man we know as Jesus is truly his, when rigorous academic scholarship says otherwise, places our teaching on a crumbling foundation. Our credibility disintegrates and the faith we are trying to instill has no foundation. We must do better.

Christian tradition has deep roots in the story of Jesus' birth. This story has been called "The Christmas Story," "The Reason for the Season," "The Birth of God," and "The Greatest Story Ever Told." This story comes from two of the canonical Gospels, Matthew and Luke, and is told very differently by their authors. Matthew tells of a noble heritage, of Joseph's view of the impending birth and of wise men, a star and opulent gifts. Luke tells the story from Mary's point of view with a long journey to Bethlehem, a crowded inn, a manger and shepherds guided by angels. Modern day Christians have taken these two stories, melded them together and created one magnificent story that gives miraculous details of Jesus' birth and is said to be "the Gospel Truth." As it says in *The Acts of Jesus* (Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar), "In so doing, they ignore the discrepancies and contradictions." This story has become the centerpiece of the most extravagant holiday celebration in the United States.

According to *The Acts of Jesus* (Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, p. 498), there are similarities in the two birth stories: both Matthew and Luke agree that Jesus was born in Bethlehem and that Nazareth was his home village; that Joseph was the name of Jesus' father, Mary was the name of Jesus' mother, that Joseph and Mary were engaged, but not married; that Mary was described as a virgin at the time she conceived and that Joseph was not involved in the conception; that Jesus was the name of the child, and that he was believed to be the savior of the people. When it came to a vote, the only parts of the birth stories that were colored red (believed to be historically accurate) or pink (close to historically accurate) in *The Acts of Jesus* (Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, p. 500-510, 520-523), were as follows:

From Matthew 1:1-17, 18-25, 2:1-12:

“Jesus ... was a descendant of ... Abraham.” (Red)

“Joseph, the husband of Mary, who was the mother of Jesus.” (Red)

“... he took <Mary as> his wife.... Joseph named him Jesus.” (Red)

“Jesus was born (Red) ... when Herod was king.” (Pink)

From Luke 2:1-7, 21-40:

“... it so happened that a decree was issued by Emperor Augustus that a census be taken.... This first census was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria.” (Pink)

“... Mary, to whom he was engaged; Mary was pregnant.” (Red)

“... she gave birth to a son,...” (Red)

“Now eight days later, when the time came to circumcise him (Pink), they gave him the name Jesus.” (Red)

It was not unusual for authors to trace the origins of their subjects to the ancestors of heroes and heroines, and even the gods (*The Acts of Jesus*, Robert W. Funk and the Jesus Seminar, p. 499). Undoubtedly writers and storytellers used the practice, common in those days, called midrash, bringing scriptural prophecies forward and applying them to a new hero. Parallels to the details of Jesus' birth stories can be found in the stories of many Old Testament characters (Moses, Samson, Samuel), and prophecies can be found in books of the Hebrew Bible such as Micah, Hosea, Isaac, Isaiah and Jeremiah (*Born Divine* by Robert J. Miller). There are also sensational birth stories attributed to political figures and other heroes of that time. All of these make good stories and raise the status of the subject, but that does not mean they are historically accurate. In the words of Bishop John Shelby Spong, “... no recognized New Testament scholar, Catholic or Protestant, would today seriously defend the historicity of these narratives.... Indeed, the concept of virgin birth itself, if understood in a literal biological fashion, is today quickly dismissed in scholarly circles.” (*Born of a Woman*, p. 44–45)

And yet, there is something about the story of Jesus' birth that resonates with people, that draws us in over and over again. In most Christian churches, church attendance grows through Advent, culminating with Christmas. The Christmas services (Christmas Sunday, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day) are the most heavily attended of the year. It seems we never tire of stories that proclaim new life and hope for a better world. The question becomes, how do we celebrate with integrity an event that never happened? How do we celebrate an authentic form of Christmas without destroying the faith of people who hold this traditional story as “proof” of the divinity of Jesus, the center of their faith? And, perhaps more importantly, if that faith crumbles because it was built on a faulty foundation, what else do we have to offer?

Bill Easum, a minister, author and church growth specialist, writes, “It does not matter what people know following the Sunday morning service! They need to leave feeling loved, affirmed and inspired.” Christmas tends to fall in this category, but a Christmas that is only a feel good exercise loses its depth. A good feeling is wonderful (and certainly is an improvement over guilt and blame) and it lasts about ten minutes. Put another way, “The Sunday morning

experience is a journey into another realm, alien and at odds with the work-a-day world. The plausibility of the Sunday experience is growing weaker and weaker. Little or nothing of that experience can be carried over to Monday morning.” (Robert Funk in the November-December 2003 *Fourth R* article “The Sunday Morning Experience”). A celebration of Christmas that is both authentic and meaningful, even inspirational, must speak to the logical mind as well as the subjective feelings. With this in mind, I use a certain flow for the Christmas season that speaks to both the head and the heart:

- **Sundays in Advent** are used for teaching, contrasting the cultural context with the world we live in, exploring a different aspect of the traditional story each Sunday and bringing it forward to apply to our lives today. (See Addendum I for theme ideas.)
- **Christmas Sunday** is a lively celebration with great music (we have a few songs with good lyrics, but still struggle on with traditional Christmas carols) and a parallel story (either told or enacted) that brings out the essence of Christmas. (See Addendum II for story suggestions.)
- **Christmas Eve** people seem to want a feeling of holiness and tradition (that is, comfort), something to which they can bring their family and friends without alienating them, and yet something that won’t insult their intelligence. We have a sacred candlelighting service in which we read the story of Jesus’ birth from the Bible (emphasizing that it is a story, in fact two stories, and a brief description of the source of the stories); a ritual of lighting candles for the different elements of the story (manger, Bethlehem, star, angel, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, etc.), an explanation of what that represents in each of us; lighting of individual candles; and beautiful music woven through the service.

As Christmas grows close, we focus more on the spirit of the celebration, sound historical interpretation and a personal experience of birthing a higher expression of living and put less emphasis on the birth that took place 2000 years ago.

I believe the work of clergy is the practical application of theological hypotheses. Clergy use the beliefs, doctrine, scripture and related research – all available tools – to give hope to those who have lost it, to help people live rich, meaningful, fulfilling lives, and to encourage people to participate in creating a world in which all people have the opportunity to thrive. I also believe clergy must be highly responsible for the words they use and the “truth” they teach. In *The Historical Jesus Goes to Church*, Roy Hoover writes, “It will not do to try to have it both ways: to insist that it is all right for us to continue to use traditional theological language, since we don’t mean it literally anymore.” Mahatma Gandhi said, “...what may appear as truth to one person will often appear as untruth to another person.... God alone knows absolute Truth.” (*Gandhi the Man* by Eknath Easwaran, p. 149) Our understanding of “the truth” will continue to evolve. While the “truth” we teach may not be the Absolute Truth, we must use the best information available, applying the skills of critical thinking and continually attempting to look beyond the easy answer. It is the responsibility of anyone who attempts to teach others to speak clearly from a solid foundation.

There are some guidelines that have emerged over time:

- **Go slow.** I have eight Platform Assistants who alternate reading and interpreting Scripture each Sunday. When we first began exploring the Jesus Seminar material, I gave a copy of *The Complete Gospels* (Edited by Robert Miller) to each of them as a Christmas gift. I told them they didn't have to go along with its ideas or use the commentary, but I wanted them to check it out each time they were given a scripture and be aware of the commentary. Most of them use that or *The Five Gospels* (Funk, Hoover and The Jesus Seminar) and rely on the commentary regularly.
- **Educate, educate, educate.** My husband Ed and I taught classes on the parables. Another man in our congregation, who has attended two Westar Meetings, receives *The Fourth R*, and is a voracious reader and Jesus Seminar advocate, teaches on-going Bible classes based on Jesus Seminar material. We sponsored a Jesus Seminar on the Road in our community. I frequently refer to Jesus Seminar material in my Sunday morning messages and almost always use Jesus Seminar material as a focal point when I am guest speaking at other churches. I often use scripture from the Gospel of Thomas, and occasionally use scripture from other lesser known gospels (Infancy Gospel of James during Advent, Infancy Gospel of Thomas, the Gospel of Peter during Lent and the Gospel of Mary after hearing Karen King's presentation in October, 2003).
- **Balance comfort and stretch.** When I am giving a talk that stretches the comfort zone of most people in the congregation, I ask my musicians for gentle, sweet, comforting music. When I am giving a Sunday morning series that stretches people's minds, I offer a class that uses more familiar material (and vice versa). I try to be aware of the general tenor of the congregation. I want to engage their minds and hearts without pushing them out the door. I want to teach with sensitivity without losing my sense of integrity. I want to help people to think for themselves and build a firm foundation for their own faith.
- **Encourage exploration rather than demanding allegiance.** People come with different spiritual experiences, different beliefs, different educational backgrounds, different life experiences and circumstances, and different expectations. Everyone processes the material and integrates it into life at his/her own pace. Each of us must have time for this process to mature. Spiritual wisdom is a lifetime exploration that progresses as our experience and understanding progress. Our churches can create safe containers for this exploration. Clergy can plant seeds. The Jesus Seminar material can be used as a wonderful catalyst.

I have been using material from the Jesus Seminar for over ten years. I still love Christmas. And I love stretching the minds of my congregants. I like to challenge people to wrestle with their beliefs, engage in critical thinking and build a practical faith for themselves, one that will withstand the turbulence of our times. The profile of Jesus that has emerged from the work of the Jesus Seminar scholars is that of a strong man who saw through the stereotypes

of his time, who saw beauty and power in ordinary people, who stood up for what he believed in, lived in the midst of an abiding presence that encompassed all of life. He was born, as we all are, small, precious, and hungry, born into a life of challenge and opportunity. The Jesus Seminar material has created an avenue for fresh discovery, good discussion and has energized our congregation. Some people have left (it was too risky). Others have brought friends. It's not a comforting process, but it is exciting.

Christmas is rich with opportunity. People are searching for meaning. They are easily swayed by "good preaching." It's up to "the preacher" not to misuse this power, but to speak with integrity based on solid scholarship. The Jesus Seminar has provided us with good, solid material to use. The fun is in deciding how we will use it!

Addendum I: Ideas for Advent Themes

THE BIRTH OF A SOUL (Using the Gospel of Mary and its guide to "the ascent of the soul.")

- Capturing the Possibility
- Coming to Terms
- Preparing a Place
- Awe and Wonder

BIRTH AND REBIRTH (Traditions have become so much a part of our Christmas celebration that we think they are what Christmas is all about. But Christmas runs deeper than any of these traditions. Every year, the same spirit that lived in Jesus is reborn in us as we remember who we are, why we're here, and how God is seeking expression in the world through us.)

- Anticipation
- Annunciation
- Proclamation
- Fulfillment

WHAT IF ...? (What if you used this time to prepare yourself to bring forth the life within you in a new way? What if you took this time to walk through your own empty places or contemplate your lofty dreams, or birth an awakened sense of the sacred?)

- The Wise Men ... What If?
- The Shepherds ... What If?
- The Child ... What If?
- God's Gift

IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE (Using clips from the movie "*It's a Wonderful Life*")

- To Lasso the Moon
- Second Class Angels
- What If You'd Never Been Born?
- It's a Wonderful Life

IT'S COMING! IT'S COMING!

The Beginning: Then and Now

The Prophecy: Seeds of Christmas

The Facts: Santa and/or Jesus

The Story: The Heart of Christmas

THE CHRISTMAS STORY (Weaving the story of long ago into the story of now and forever)

A Promise, a Hope

Miracles and Mystery

Mainstream Miracles

The Wisdom of Forever

Addendum II: Stories that Parallel Aspects of the Scriptural Stories:

The Give Away by Ray Buckley

Stories from *Once Upon a Christmas* by James Dillet Freeman (I

Particularly like "An Event of Major Importance")

The Polar Express by Chris Van Allsburg (This book is being made into a
movie this year, starring Tom Hanks.)

The Other Wise Man by Henry Van Dyke

The Gift of the Magi by O. Henry