

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. Amen*

In the fourth century, Gregory of Nyssa, (bishop, theologian, and contributor to the Nicene Creed) described and praised God's great Christmas gift in this way: "O inexpressible mystery and unheard paradox: The Invisible is seen, the Intangible is touched, the eternal Word becomes accessible to our speech, the Timeless steps into time, the Son of God becomes the Son of Man!"

The Invisible love of God is now miraculously able to be seen, the Intangible love of God is now able to be touched, the eternal Word of God becomes accessible to our speech and playfully twists and turns on our tongues, the Timeless treasure of God's love steps directly and suddenly into time, the Son of God becomes the Son of Man! That is indeed the mystery and the strange paradox of Christmas as it has been revealed to us by scripture and tradition. The holy mystery of Christ's birth, the miraculous incarnation of God's love physically into this world, is a gift which we are continually unwrapping. And the unwrapping never ceases to be amazing and exciting. The Christmas gift of Love itself, the mystery of it, the paradox of it, the relief and comfort and joy it can bring, are all expressed in the historic and holy event which we remember tonight. For centuries now, in hundreds of languages and contexts, this story of the miraculous incarnation has been lovingly retold in cathedrals and around campfires, by princes and paupers and priests, by singers and storytellers, by young people like Lito and by old guys like me. We love to tell the story.

But here's an interesting thing: The Biblical stories about Christmas, which are found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke (from which Lito read this evening), are told in about 2300 words, about the length BTW of a good thorough sermon. But the actual birth of Jesus, the clinical report of his birthing, is handled in something less than 50 words by both authors combined! In Luke we hear that "the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger." No mention of contractions, dilation measurements, Apgar scores, or anything like that. In Matthew's Gospel we are told that "Joseph took Mary as his wife but had no intimate relations with her until she had given birth to a son, and he named him Jesus." No mention of cutting and tying the cord, cleaning-up afterward, or even the first feeding. A lot has been left to our imagination, and perhaps that is as it should be, for the paradoxical mystery of the incarnation of God's nature into human flesh is undoubtedly more miraculous than clinical, something more to be revered than medically charted.

But what of those other twenty-two hundred fifty words in the Biblical stories of Jesus' birth? What are they about? That's the interesting thing...they are all about the reactions and responses to his birth. Now, in that count of words (in English translation from the Greek, of course), I am including everything from Mary's three-month visit to her cousin Elizabeth when they were both pregnant (remember, baby John jumped up and down for joy in Elizabeth's womb?!) to Joseph's fleeing with his wife and newborn son to Egypt for safety. In all of that extra-clinical text, we hear responses to the birth of Christ both on earth and in the heavens, both nearby and far away. A host of angels, who probably got the news first after all, can't contain their joyful singing in response to the news. And Luke tells us how they got the attention of some sleepy shepherds nearby and terrified them. Imagine the quiet peaceful night sky being suddenly pierced by something like a nuclear bomb blast (maybe not a good analogy, lol). But when the shepherds had been reassured and told the good news, their response was so emotional that they irresponsibly left their vulnerable sheep behind and went looking for a miracle. Bless their hearts. But there's more, isn't there?!

Matthew tells us that there were Magi, or wise ones, whose response to Jesus' birth is also

counted among the 2300 Biblical words. Their response was to bring symbolic gifts. Now, Matthew doesn't really tell us who they were or how many of them followed that famous star westward...there were three gifts, but we don't know how many wise guys. Maybe they were kings, but more likely they were prophets or priests. Some think they might have been priests of the ancient order of Melchizedek, a priesthood of mystic tradition which dated back to the time of Abraham, but had been cast out of the Jerusalem temple during the days of David and Solomon. They had been apparently more devoted to wisdom than liturgy, more interested in content than conformity. Perhaps they saw in this new royal birth a way back into the mainstream of the national religious life, a way to again be taken seriously in the spiritual conscience of the people. But in any case, they too are part of the responsive story of the Christmas event. They, too, account for some of those thousands of words. Bless their hearts. But there's more, isn't there?!

Herod, that Jewish collaborator with the Roman occupation, is the villain of the story, and he, too, has a part in this narrative of Jesus' birth. It's that group of traveling wise ones who first bring the news of a newborn king to his attention. They weren't trying to give-away a sacred secret, they were just stopping-by for directions, but the news got under Herod's skin and, according to Matthew, got all of Jerusalem disturbed, too. Imagine the chaos a pretentious new king might bring to the occupied city, which, while disrespected and confined, was at least finally at peace with its neighbors. Cunning fox that he was, Herod tried to trick the Magi into revealing the location of the baby Jesus, not so that he might greet the newborn, but that he might assassinate him. His trickery a failure, he resorts to brutal violence in what's known as the 'massacre of the Innocents'. And so, he also becomes part of the Christmas story Matthew tells us. But there are yet others, aren't there.

Now, of course there are Mary and Joseph, both of whom are faithful to their callings despite their reluctance. They are both confronted by angel messengers with life-changing requests from God. How do they respond? How do they respond to the mystery and paradox of it all? As your priest, and spiritual coach, I encourage you to use some of the next 12 days of Christmas to read those twenty-three hundred words in the stories told in the first two chapters of both Matthew and Luke. Well, you can kind of skip through the first chapter of Matthew, which is meant mostly to credibly establish Jesus's lineage from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and David, with Joseph as sort of a step-dad. But as you're reading the Biblical narrative, notice the responses to the actual clinical birth of the Lord. Think of the characters and what they represent in this story: The astonishment of Mary, the tireless work of Joseph, the amazement of the Shepherds, the longing of the wise ones, the fears of Herod, the prophecies of Simeon and Anna, a couple of characters whom you will also meet in these chapters. And think about all the questions with which they live through these times. It's always, I think, the trail of questions, not the presumed answers, which lead us onward along the way. Are these characters asking faithful questions?

And then, of course, there is the point of this sermon, which I hope is concurrent with the point of the Christmas story as it is revealed to us by scripture and tradition: How do we become part of this litany of responses to Christ's birth? How can we add our own personal words to this story? What questions lead *us* faithfully forward? Given the pronouncement of the angels, breaking the peaceful illusion of the darkness like a lightning bolt and thunderclap, how will we respond? Will we hear ourselves called by name like Mary or Joseph? Will our longings be inspired by some migrating star of divine origin? Will we need God's help to overcome some baffling, seductive, personal, Herodian flaw? How can we be active and meaningful characters in the Christmas story? In our lives, our families, our homes, and our communities, how can we best respond to the inexpressible mystery and unheard-of paradox? What is the faithful thing to do now? Merry Christmas!