

HEARTBEATS Staying Connected 2/3/2023

Dear Friends in CHRIST,

A question I ask from time to time in Bible study class is, “Why did the author write this down? Why was this story important to record?” There are many things that could have been recorded, but the writers of the Bible felt that the things we have were valuable for the people then and can still be valuable for us today. “Why did they write this down?” can be a worthwhile question to consider when we hear the scripture readings in church. It is a good place to start whenever we read the Bible. The question can lead us to learning more about the author and about the people who would receive what was transcribed.

Consider, for example, the three stories of JESUS birth. (You may be thinking that there are only two, but I’ll try to clear that up in a moment.) Mark, the first Gospel-writer didn’t include a birth story for JESUS, but the other three did, though each is unique and can tell us some significant things when we take the time to consider them.

Matthew tells of Joseph’s role in the nativity narrative, how he stayed faithful to a pregnant fiancée, of the lineage of JESUS through his earthly father Joseph, and also of the visit of the magi and the escape of the holy family into Egypt. Matthew writes primarily for a Jewish community that knows well the scriptures, what we today call the Old Testament. They are a patriarchal society, so telling the story through the father is important. They know that the MESSIAH, the SAVIOR is to be descended from David as Joseph is, to be born in Bethlehem, and to come out of Egypt. So, Matthew is telling them that JESUS fulfills all this and, therefore, is the MESSIAH. But he is also saying that JESUS comes, not just for the Jews, but for foreigners as well as the magi come from foreign nations to worship HIM.

Luke’s nativity focuses on Mary, the visit of the angel to her, her blessedness, and also her lineage as JESUS’ mother. Included in Luke’s gospel are the stable birth when there is no other place to stay, the angel host, and the shepherds who come to see the baby. The bloodline of JESUS has no other earthly connection except through his mother who is also a descendant of David. HE is born in poverty, the kind of poverty in which many lived. And it is to the shepherds, the lowest in society that the good news is first proclaimed and announced. Yet it is also the angels, greater beings than humankind, who worship JESUS as well as the humble shepherds.

John’s story of the birth of JESUS (the third nativity story) is much different than the other two. John begins by talking about the WORD who was in the beginning and through whom everything was created. And John is very clear to say that the WORD is GOD. Then, a few verses later, he tells that “The WORD became flesh and dwelt among us.” That’s how John describes the birth of JESUS, the ONE who comes to live among us. At the time that John wrote his Gospel, there were those who claimed that JESUS was just a man who was possessed or taken over by GOD at HIS baptism and then GOD left the man when JESUS gave up HIS SPIRIT on the cross. Therefore, the man JESUS wasn’t really GOD. This is called the Adoptionist heresy. So, John wants to make it clear that the WORD who existed through all time and was and is GOD is the ONE who became human as JESUS. GOD came and lived and died and rose again. GOD didn’t just “adopt” the human body of JESUS.

As you can see, each writer had specific reasons to record what they did. Paul often wrote letters to churches who were struggling with issues, and reading his letters will tell you much about those

congregations. Asking, “Why did the author write this down?” will lead to more questions and greater learning as you study the Bible and seek to better understand its message for you and for our congregation and our world. Give it a try and see where it takes you.

In CHRIST'S love,
Pastor Jeffrey