Introduction – Peeling Away the Layers

Diane and I enjoy the few antiques that we have. In fact, the first birthday present that I bought her was a large dark oak buffet from the 1920’s that we still have in our home. While in Indiana, we bought a pre-Civil War hutch with the bubbly glass and very unique dovetailing where the wood is joined together. Right now we live in a very plain home that was built in 1980. Our antiques sometimes seem just a bit out of place. But when we lived in Indiana and again in Sioux Falls we lived in homes that more closely fit the ambiance and warmth of our furniture. In fact, our home in Huntington was a kit home from Sears & Roebuck built in 1915.

Those old homes have beautiful wood. The problem, however, is that very often the wood has been painted over many times and hides the warmth and beauty of the original grain. Fortunately, none of the previous owners of our home in Sioux Falls painted the trim and we enjoyed the beauty of dark wood as it complimented our old furniture. But in Huntington, trim and doors had been painted many times over. I wanted to enjoy the warmth of the wood grain on at least a couple of the doors so I removed them and stripped off the paint. There were several layers and it took quite a while. But the result of seeing the original beauty of the wood was worth the toil of removing all of the layers of paint that had been applied for many years.

In a lot of ways, the Christmas Story is like that. Jesus’ birth was foretold in the Old Testament. But we only have two narratives of his actual birth, found in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke. But over two thousand years, we have overlaid the story with misunderstandings, cultural prejudice, and other embellishments. Even though we read the stories from each gospel each year, our imaginations are also inspired by our Christmas pageants, from the most simple children’s program to Living Christmas Trees to the elaborate production the Crystal Cathedral used to run every night for a month. We’ve got shepherds and magi crowding into a tiny stable to catch a glimpse of the Christ Child while angels fly overhead. And, of course, all of this is
surrounded by a bleak midwinter snow. It feels good. It’s warm and it’s cozy. The music brings us back to our childhood and fond memories.

I enjoy it as much as anyone. In fact, for eight years, I had the wonderful privilege of directing a Christmas pageant for the Living Christmas Tree in Sioux City, Iowa. Without a doubt, even with all the work, my fondest Christmas memories will always be there. We had a lavish set, a full orchestra and a large choir retelling the Christmas Story. For each of those eight years, we sold out every performance. I truly miss it.

I love Christmas pageantry – simple or elaborate. I still enjoy singing and playing the carols. I enjoy giving and receiving Christmas cards and letters. But like layers of paint over beautiful wood grain, I am afraid that we have sometimes distanced ourselves from the plain humanity and reality of the birth of Jesus. I’m no Scrooge or Party-Pooper. I think we should keep on doing all of our Christmas celebrations with great joy and gusto. But bear with me this morning. Open your imagination as I try to peel away some of the layers to give us a clearer picture of what really happened when Jesus was born.

**Text – John 1:1-5; 9-13**

In the beginning was the Word [Jesus], and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made. In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.
His Dysfunctional Family

Every family has its share of dysfunction. Perhaps some have more than their share. In my family tree, I’ve got adulterers, alcoholics, a clandestine abortion, divorce, suicide and even accusations of witchcraft. Dig a little into ancestry.com and you’ll probably find some unwelcome surprises, too. Perhaps you have to deal with dysfunction first-hand. Jesus’ family tree was no different. If you look in Matthew’s genealogy, found in the first chapter of his Gospel, you’ll discover the very interesting inclusion of four women. This had to be intentional on Matthew’s part because women weren’t included in any genealogies during that time. You won’t find them in any of the Old Testament lists or in Luke’s genealogy. One would think that if a woman was to be included in the family tree of the Messiah that she would be of the highest caliber and moral standing. In the family tree of Jesus we should expect women like Sarah or Rachel. Instead, we get Tamar who seduced her father-in-law. Rahab was a prostitute. Ruth was a Moabite, whose family originated through an incestuous relationship. Finally, Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah who had an affair with King David, is in the list. There are godly kings and there are wicked kings. One even offered his own child as a human sacrifice to a pagan god.

What a mess! Profoundly, when the angel announced to Joseph that Mary would bear a son by the Holy Spirit, he said, “She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

We know that Joseph and Mary were exceptionally godly people. That doesn’t mean that they were perfect, however. Mary probably had to remind Joseph to take out the trash and put his clothes in the hamper. And, no doubt, Joseph had to calm Mary down to keep her from worrying. Jesus grew up in a normal home. Mary may have had a hard time cutting the “apron strings.” Jesus, after all, was the oldest son in the family. Both Matthew and Mark tell the story of Mary trying to get Jesus’ attention while he was actively ministering. You know how moms can be sometimes.

Jesus had brothers, too. What I find very interesting is that none of his brothers were among the twelve disciples. I suspect they had trouble believing that their oldest brother was the Messiah - the Savior of the world. Perhaps Mary told them that he was unique, but I can just imagine the

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jealousy that was part of the family dynamic. It wasn’t until after Jesus rose from the dead that his brother James became a devoted follower. Jesus had a normal family with its own share of dysfunction.

His Extraordinary Ordinary Birth
The conception of Jesus in Mary’s womb, however, was supernatural. Following the Scriptures, all Christian creeds affirm that Jesus was “conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the virgin Mary.” For over a hundred years, theological liberals have sought to deny the virgin birth of Christ. To do so is to step outside of the Christian faith. Without the virgin birth, Jesus is no longer fully Divine – as John and all the gospel writers clearly teach. If Jesus was conceived by Joseph, he would have inherited the same sin nature and curse that plagues all of humanity. The conception of Jesus was Divine; his birth, however, was fully human.

It is quite remarkable that Mary was able to make the four-day trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem when she was full-term. I’ve never been pregnant, but I can just imagine if she was walking or even riding on a donkey. Just think of the pressure on her feet and the jarring. It is by God’s grace and design that they made it to Joseph’s home town of Bethlehem. And that’s where the Christmas Story as we know it sometimes moves away from what likely happened.

We’ve always assumed that Jesus was born in some sort of stable. Lately, some scholars have suggested that the stable that Jesus was born in was possibly a cave, since there are many in the Bethlehem hills. But Kenneth Bailey, a scholar who grew up, was trained and taught in Middle Eastern culture suggests another likely alternative. Hospitality in Jewish culture in Jesus’ day was one of the highest social values. It is nearly inconceivable that a husband with a pregnant wife would have been shown the barn because there wasn’t any space to accommodate them. And yet Luke’s gospel clearly says that Jesus was laid in a manger – an animal’s feeding trough – because “there was no room in the inn.”

Our misunderstanding stems from layering on our own experience into the Scriptures. Bethlehem had no Super 8 motel or its equivalent when Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem. The word “inn” in Luke’s birth narrative is the same word translated as “guest room” later in his
gospel where the Last Supper was shared (Luke 22:11). Kenneth Bailey goes on to explain that homes during that time often had an entry area of the house where the owners would often bring their livestock in during the night in order to protect them from theft or wandering packs of dogs. During the colder winter months, the animals would also help to heat the home. The living space was often built up a few feet from the space where the animals were. Feed troughs – mangers – would have set right on the higher level of the family room. When Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem, all of the guest-rooms in the homes were taken because of the crowded conditions brought on by the census. But certainly one hospitable Jew – most likely, one of Joseph’s relatives – brought them into the regular family room where Mary gave birth and conveniently put the baby in one of the feeding troughs.

We’ve been told, too, that the shepherds were outcasts and undesirables. It is true that the shepherds would have represented the poor class, but they were not considered social outcasts at the time. It is important, I believe, to note that the first birth announcement went to poor shepherds. The kingdom of heaven belongs, after all, to those who are poor in spirit (Matt. 5:3). The Messiah would be a Shepherd for his people. Messiah would come through the line of King David, who was also a shepherd. Luke tells us that the shepherds were terrified at the appearance of the angel who announced Jesus’ birth. We would all be terrified. The Scripture says, “…and the glory of the Lord shown around them” when the angel showed up. After the angel assured them of his good intentions, imagine their joy as they witnessed the multitude of angels that surrounded them as they proclaimed, “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased” (Luke 2:14). The Scriptures don’t say that the angels sang, but I can hardly conceive of not singing such wonderful news!

We really don’t’ know how many magi there were. We assume there were three because of the three gifts mentioned. Someone has suggested that there were actually four, but the last was turned away because he brought fruitcake. We don’t know exactly when the magi came to see Jesus. Matthew tells us that it was “after Jesus was born” (Matt. 2:1). It could have been up to two years after his birth, but certainly they did not come with the shepherds. They weren’t royalty and they weren’t necessarily wise in the biblical sense. They were educated and learned. They were interested in dreams, astrology, the stars, magic, and the future. They were Gentiles.

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from the East. Matthew’s readers probably would not have viewed them positively. The wonder and irony of the story is the eagerness with which these Gentile magi sought the Savior while the Jewish leaders of the day could not have cared less. Matthew’s narrative dramatizes John’s commentary, “He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him.”

**He Shared Our Humanity**

Why does all this retelling and consideration of the Christmas Story really matter? Am I just giving you material to win some trivia game at a Christmas party? Is it snobbery? Certainly not. The birth of Jesus is not a myth. It really happened. His birth was earthy, with pain and blood and crying. But Oh, imagine the joy when his face appeared! This little baby boy was the Promised One who would save us from our sins. But still, he was a real baby boy with real baby “issues.” He needed his umbilical cord cut from the placenta. He nursed at Mary’s breast. He needed his diaper changed. He didn’t sleep through the night for several weeks. Mary and Joseph were probably perpetually tired like all new parents.

Not only was his birth earthy, it was risky. It was dangerous. His parents had to pick him up and run for their lives has the king’s murderous gang came and slaughtered all baby boys under the age of two in Bethlehem. Jesus made his entrance into a hateful, broken, and sinful world…just like ours.

And that’s the message that I want you to grasp this morning. Take stock of your life. How many years do you have on this earth? What is the essence of your life? A cynical man once said, “…man is born to trouble as surely as sparks fly upward” (Job 5:1). You may have personal troubles right now. If you don’t, you will. And how long will your life last? In light of eternity, our life is like the grass, here today and withered and gone the next. Look around. There’s trouble in our economy. Evil terrorists want us dead. People are mean. Diseases ravage our bodies.

Stop! Stop! Stop! …Enough already. This world is broken. We all know it.
The Bible says,

“And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.”

John 1:14

The message I want you to get this morning is that Jesus entered into your humanity. All the brokenness that you know, he has taken upon himself. He bore your griefs and carried your sorrows (Isa. 53:4). He has taken the fullness of all of our brokenness upon himself and nailed it to the cross. And after three days in the grave, he rose again, victorious over all of the sin and brokenness of this world. One day, he will return, not as a little baby, but as a conquering King and turn this upside-down world right. His invitation to you and to me is to leave behind our sin and brokenness, believing in him and be born again into his life. We read it earlier,

He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God.”

John 1:12

My prayer for you this Christmas is that you will fully receive Christ as your personal Savior.

Song of Response: O Little Town of Bethlehem #169