

WPC
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Creche Crash
Matt. 2:1-12; Luke 2:8-14

In early 1965, Charles Schultz, creator of the Peanuts cartoon series, was asked to create a Christmas cartoon to be aired later that year. He and his producers laid out the basics of the cartoon within a few hours. It would include ice-skating, a pageant, a mix of Christmas carols and Vince Guaraldi's contemporary jazz, and the message that Christmas is really about the joyful miracle of Jesus' birth. Schultz wanted "A Charlie Brown Christmas" to have the religious meaning that was central to his own experience of Christmas. Television executives hated it from the start. It was criticized as being too religious -- Linus quotes straight from the King James Bible reading Luke 2:8-14.

Schultz's two producers cautioned him about putting something like that in the special because they were convinced it wouldn't go over well. Charles Schultz faced both of the producers and said, "If not us, then who's going to do it?" Schultz stuck to his principles and it was produced just as he wanted it.

On Thursday, December 9, 1965, "A Charlie Brown Christmas" was seen in more than 15 million homes, capturing nearly half of the possible audience. It won critical acclaim as well as an Emmy Award for Outstanding Children's Program and a Peabody Award for excellence in programming.¹

Of the four gospels, only two, Matthew and Luke, tell the story of Jesus' birth. If you're anything like me, you love to hear these familiar stories every year in December. One of my favorite scenes in "A Charlie Brown Christmas" is the part that almost got cut out by the t.v. producers, when Linus teaches everyone about the true meaning of Christmas by quoting from the King James version of Luke chapter 2. I never get tired of hearing those words:

“And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed...

And Joseph also went up from Galilee...with Mary, being great with child.

And the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she wrapped her newborn son in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

¹ Preachingillustrations.com, for the week of Dec. 20-25, 2009.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

And lo (got to have the “lo”), the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them, and they were sore afraid (You know no one can say “sore afraid” like Linus!).

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. (And that’s the true meaning of Christmas, Charlie Brown!)”

Yet the very familiarity of these texts sometimes gets in the way of our hearing them in a fresh way. If there’s any story we know by heart from the gospels, it’s this one, right? Or do we? When was the last time we looked closely at the birth narratives and paid attention to the details? How well do we really know the Christmas story?

Let’s take a little Christmas quiz. This is the best kind of quiz to take – nobody’s going to get graded, you’ll be given the answers after each question, and, if you manage to achieve a perfect score, then you’ll have the satisfaction of getting a higher score than your pastor. Ready?

- 1) How did Mary and Joseph travel to Bethlehem?
 - a. on a camel
 - b. on a donkey
 - c. they walked
 - d. Joseph walked, Mary rode on a donkey
 - e. No one knows

Answer: E. We don't really know how Joseph and Mary got to Bethlehem from Nazareth and the Bible gives us no account of their trip. People through the ages have imagined them traveling on foot or by donkey and have depicted them this way in paintings and sculptures.

- 2) Jesus was born in
 - a. a stable
 - b. a hospital
 - c. a cave
 - d. a house
 - e. a place unknown

Answer: E. The Bible records that "there was no room for them to stay in the inn," but it doesn't tell us that Mary and Joseph went from inn to inn and were turned away or that any innkeeper took pity on them because Mary was pregnant. The mention of Mary lying the child in a "manger"

likely led people in later times to assume Jesus was born in some sort of stable. In ancient times, however, stables as we know them didn't exist. Instead, animals were kept in the enclosed courtyards of inns or in nearby caves. It's possible that Mary and Joseph were forced to sleep in such a place when they found no room in the inn.

- 3) Which animals does the Bible say were present at Jesus' birth?
- a. cows, donkeys, sheep
 - b. a lamb and a donkey
 - c. goats, sheep, cows
 - d. we aren't told

Answer: D. The mention of the 'manger' in which Mary laid the baby suggests that Mary and Joseph had to sleep among the animals, but no mention of them is made in the Bible.

- 4) When Mary gave birth to Jesus she was
- a. married to Joseph
 - b. engaged to Joseph
 - c. living with Joseph
 - d. about 14 years old

Answer: A. According to Luke, they were just engaged, but Matthew tells us they were married (Matt. 1:24-'When Joseph awoke from sleep, he

did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son'). Scholars believe that Mary was probably about 14 years old.

- 5) The wise men found Jesus in
 - a. a stable
 - b. a house
 - c. an inn
 - d. we don't know

Answer: B. We're told they found the child and his parents in a house in Bethlehem (Matt. 2:11). The star over Bethlehem appeared in the east at about the time of Jesus' birth. It's likely that the wise men did not arrive until Jesus was almost 2 years old, since it was children 2 years old and under that Herod had put to death. By the way, we don't even know how many wise men there were – people over the years have assumed three because there were 3 gifts, but the text doesn't give us a number.

Copies of the full quiz are available for you to pick up at the back of the sanctuary.

It's kind of embarrassing, but it wasn't until a year into seminary that I realized that the wise men were not present at the manger along with the shepherds. In fact, early in my seminary career I once preached a sermon on

the contrasts between the lowly shepherds and the exalted wise men, both of whom were present at the stable. Oops.

But of course I grew up watching “The Little Drummer Boy” on t.v. Do you remember that show? The little boy follows the wise men to the manger and watches them present their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the baby Jesus. Not having anything else to offer, the little boy plays a song on the drum. I loved that song and that movie as a young boy, and so it wasn’t until recent years, when I was re-reading the Christmas passages, that I realized I was guilty of crèche crash, when all the characters from various parts of the Christmas story come crashing together in the nativity scene.

We crèche crash all the time at Christmas: nativity scenes, Christmas pageants. Let’s face it - it’s so much fun to see all the characters together, even if it’s not quite accurate. I expect there may also be some value to a crèche crash.

One pastor tells of a family who brought out their nativity scene in early December. “The two-year-old child was thrilled by the process of unwrapping the various pieces. There was discussion of each one. Here is Mary, the mother. Here is Joseph, and here is baby Jesus. Here are kings bringing their gifts. Here is the one shepherd carrying the smallest lamb,

and the other one playing the flute there in the corner. Here is the donkey and there is the cow kneeling near the baby to keep him warm. Up there is the angel, who as usual needed fresh glue to remain on high. The scene was gloriously complete, and the parents moved on to other tasks.

The next day the parents noted a striking change in the nativity scene. There on the table the child had set all the favorite figures which had been lying around the house all year. It was as if they, too, had arrived in haste – the busload of Fisher-Price people, the clown, the bears, the dinosaur, and the irascible Donald Duck. They all were included by the child. The circle was spread wide, wider.” (Rush Otey, *Journal For Preachers*, Vol. XXIX, No. 1, p.4) What an insightful reminder of the inclusiveness of God!

But it’s also important for us at times to step back and let the texts speak for themselves. Matthew’s the one who gives us kings and gifts of gold and frankincense and the star shining over the holy family.

In Luke, it’s much simpler, really: “During Mary and Joseph’s stay in Bethlehem, Jesus is born. The guest room was apparently occupied and hence could offer no privacy, so Mary and Joseph had withdrawn to a stable at the back of or underneath the house, perhaps in a cave. A feeding trough served as a crib. How simple and bare it all seems. Luke has kept the story clean of any decoration that would remove it from the lowly, the poor, and

the marginal of the earth. In the history of the church there have been many so poor and abandoned as to be able to identify with this scene.” (Fred Craddock, Interpretation Commentary on Luke, p. 35)

Christmas is the time when we celebrate God’s greatest gift. Whether we resonate more with Luke’s lowly scene or with Matthew’s majestic one, or whether we prefer to welcome all the characters at once, Christmas is the time when we remind ourselves that the gift of Jesus is the most important element of the story; the time to make sure our priorities are straight and weigh the truly important things in our lives; the time to reacquaint ourselves with the separate stories in Matthew and Luke – and yes, to enjoy all the crèche crashes that come our way, too.

But ultimately, Christmas is a time to keep our eyes on the incredible gift of the Christ child. So let us come and worship, come and worship, worship Christ the newborn King! Amen.