

The Story Continues

We have heard and relived the narrative of Jesus' birth that has been passed down for many generations. We have heard the story as proclaimed by the Apostle Paul who observes: "But when the fullness of time had come, God sent [God's] Son, born of a woman, born under the law, in order to redeem those who were under the law." With these stories, prophecies and proclamations we sometimes forget that the birth of Jesus was not the birth of a Christian child or of Christianity. As people of faith, specifically Christians, we sometimes even forget that Jesus was born into a very Jewish family. The Jewish (and later Gentile) followers of Jesus weren't called Christians until after Jesus' lifetime on earth.

I would suggest that primarily what has shaped for many years our understanding of Christianity occurred during the Council of Nicaea which took place in 325 A.D. by the order of the Roman Emperor Constantine. At the Council of Nicaea, Emperor Constantine presided over a group of Church bishops and leaders with the purpose of defining the true God for all of Christianity and eliminating all the confusion, controversy, and contention within Christ's church and theologians continue to deconstruct the meaning, purpose and outcome of this gathering to this day.

In our attempt to universalize Jesus or Christianize Jesus, we must not make the mistake of isolating Jesus from his cultural context and make the baby named Jesus into someone that fits into our model of what Christianity should look like. Any attempt to strip the identity of this historical Jesus we speak of today is an attempt to remove who Jesus really was. It would be the same as trying to remove from us today our individual heritage, achievements or accomplishments, and those things that make us a unique part of God's perfect creation.

In this week's passage we get a glimpse of Jewish culture and three Jewish ceremonies. Three days ago we celebrated Christmas, but today we get a story about a Jewish ceremony, the story of the circumcision of Jesus. In Jewish context, this ceremony would be performed on the eighth day for all male children. Traditionally, this is done with all the aunts, uncles, grandmas, grandpas, the brothers and sisters present. But for Jesus, none of those were recorded. It is at this time the naming of the child is also done, it is naming day, during the service of circumcision, a child was given his name, which in this case, was the name Jesus. They asked the question, "How shall this child be named?" His name shall be Jesus. It was as common a name as Jim, John or Mary are today. Mary and Joseph gave their son a plain and ordinary name that was common and well known among their friends. That is what happened when Jesus was eight days old.

Our second Jewish ceremony is the purification from childbirth for Mary. According to the law, a mother's impurity, meaning that she was limited as to her ability to socialize with others, lasted 40 days after the birth of a boy (longer if she gave birth to a girl). Cooking and being seen in public places such as the synagogue were restricted during a mother's "unclean" time. When the 40 or more days had passed, the mother would go to the temple and make an offer of purification. This would result in her being proclaimed

clean again. These rituals are in part to uphold ancient understandings of hygiene and in part to protect a patriarchal system that privileges men. But it was the custom in any case.

Lastly, we see the ceremony of the consecration of the firstborn to Mary and Joseph. This ceremony affirms that the first-born is a blessing from God and is dedicated to God. For the child Jesus was to be the head of the family, the primary heir of the family inheritance, the future number one authority in the family for all disputes. In a patriarchal society, it was a special position to be the first-born male, like Jesus.

These are three very distinct Jewish ceremonies that helped to establish Jesus' identity. The reason that I am mentioning these rituals of Jesus' childhood is to emphasize that Jesus was fully human, that he was fully a child. These rituals underscore Jesus' humanity. The alternative epistle for today from Galatians tells us that Jesus was born under the law and that he was to conform to the requirements of the law. Matthew 3 tells us that Jesus was to fulfill the obligations of the law: circumcision, dedication, and purification. Luke 2 says that Jesus was to fulfill the obligations of the law. Romans says that Jesus came in the likeness of our flesh. Philippians says that Jesus was in the likeness of a human being.

All of these Biblical passages and the message of Christmas is that Jesus was a real, live, flesh and blood human being like you and me. You see, the humanity, the incarnation of Jesus, God coming fully as a human being, has often been a stumbling block for Christians. We want Jesus to be a super baby and not just a baby. Then we want him to grow up to be a super child and not just a child. Then we want him to grow up to be a superman and not just a man. And pretty soon, we want him to be a super god who has a magic wand of a fairy godmother and not be the true God of the Bible.

Now, why is this so important to mention the humanity of Jesus? I believe that the humanity of Jesus underscores for us the humanity of God. That God comes to us in very plain and ordinary ways. Through the waters of baptism, through the words of the Bible; through the bread and wine of Holy Communion. God comes to us through an ordinary person. The danger comes in what happens to us when we turn all of this into something unordinary.

We discover that God comes to us through ordinary people like myself, your spouse, your partner, your significant other, your children, your friends, your family, your co-workers. God uses plain and ordinary flesh and blood people like you and me, Mary and Joseph, to get the job done, to get the message across to everyone, and this is the continued message of Christmas.

God comes through the plain and ordinary, the fully human person like baby Jesus. Jesus was born to a plain and ordinary little fourteen year old girl. He was born in a stable, in a manger full of straw, with the smell of real, live animals in the barn. Did any of these events make him less important or special to us? Of course not! They simply affirm that his life began in ordinary ways and that he knew difficulty, hardship, and conflict, and that in the midst of his very human ordeals God was present with and in and as him. This

is also a reminder for us that in our difficulties, hardships, and conflicts, in the midst of our very ordinary ordeals God is present with, in, and as us! The common and the natural, the humble and the ordinary were chosen to express God's love to and for us.

Often the problem is we don't want an ordinary God, to come to us through the ordinary ways. We want God to come to us through extra-ordinary means. The ordinary isn't enough for us. We don't want natural miracles, we want supernatural magic. We don't want miracles worked through nature; we want magic that violates the laws of nature. We don't want natural messengers called friends; we want supernatural messengers called angels with wings and halos. We don't want God to work through the ordinary; we want God to work through the unbelievably extraordinary/extraterrestrial. We don't want Jesus to be a human baby; we want him to be a super baby.

There are many who believe that God is more present here in this sanctuary than God is present with you at your job, in your office or even in your home. In church, we feel in the presence of God, but somehow we fail to see and feel the presence of God in the faces of people with whom we interact. We would prefer to see God in our warm fuzzy feelings than in the eyes of the poor and the starving. If we fail to see the face of God in the flesh and blood of the people of the world that are surrounding us, then we fail to see the face of God at all.

I like that story about Simeon and Anna. They came to the temple that day. Two common and ordinary people, they brought the baby to them. There were no miracles, no signs, and no wonders. All they did was to look at the baby and they believed. That is what the continued Christmas message is all about; God comes to us through each other.

I love the last Sunday of the year. It is a time for me to reflect on the ordinary things in life. A time to ponder if it was an ordinary year or not. Days away from the end of 2008, and what a year it has been. For some it has been a year of dreams unfulfilled, for others a year of hope beyond expectation. We have seen changes around the globe; natural disasters, the affects of global warming, forest fires, child trafficking on the rise, missing children still missing, there is more homelessness, more job losses, more home losses, no cure for AIDS and other health issues, lives have been taken away from us all too soon, a year where discrimination toward the GLBT community has been written into constitutions, a year where Yes We Can will make it into the history books. A year of turning around. A year of moving ahead. A year of mistakes and successes. A year of dreams deferred and dreams fulfilled. Good times and bad times, successes and failures, ups and downs...ordinary stuff really. But that is how God comes and how God works...in the midst of the ordinary. No matter what has happened then, we can know God was with us every step of the way, and that makes 2008 a blessed year, and that also gives us reason to look forward to 2009 with joyful expectation.

Whatever the reality this past year has been for you, may 2009, be a year of self fulfillment, a year of dreams being fulfilled, may it be a year where all the ordinary things you need come true. Let's make 2009 what we need it to be as we continue to Let our Light Shine. Amen.