

Christmas at John's House

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

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Texts: Isaiah 9:2-7

John 1;1-9, 14-18

"And the Word became flesh and lived among us"

~ John 1:14

Prayer

**God who created our beginnings,
we give you thanks for the story of Christmas.**

**As we get closer to the manger
And the mystery of the Incarnation,
May the words of the Gospel**

Bring us into your Holy Presence

And inspire us to offer up our whole bodies, hearts and minds to Christ. Amen.

Most of the people in church pews tend to think of the Bible as a book. This is true across different traditions and denominations around the world. The propensity among Christians, at least since the 16th century, has been to think of the Bible as a collection of religious writings bunched up together in a single bound volume that holds in its pages God's Word for humankind. When they read the "Good Book," which tops the list of best-selling books in America year after year, it rarely occurs to people that the Bible is not a book.

In a nationwide survey conducted by the American Bible Society in 2021, researchers reported that 50% of Americans say that they read the Bible on a regular basis and 55%, in other words more than half of American adults, believe that the Bible is God's inerrant word or, in plain English, that the Bible is without error.¹ It is impossible to calculate how many copies of the Bible are sold in the United States every year, but conservative estimates put the number between 20 and 25 million copies.² Since the average American household owns four Bibles,³ it appears that people who already have Bibles keep adding more copies to their collection and, half of them, if not the majority, still think of the Bible as a book that is not only inspired by God's Spirit, but also inerrant and infallible. In fact, there is a significant percentage of American Christians who proudly declare themselves as Bible-believing believers. And because Bible-believing Christians want every single letter, every word, every phrase, every paragraph, every page, every chapter and story in Scriptures to be God's flawless and unerring word, they gloss over, brush off or try in vain to justify the contradictions, inconsistencies, and, sometimes, objectionable ideas that are present in the Bible. Oftentimes, atheists point to those very same inconsistencies and unsavory passages in

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the Bible to argue that there is nothing special about the “Good Book” we, Christians, read from every Sunday morning.

What both Bible-believing Christians and the cultured skeptics who criticize the Bible forget is a small but fundamental distinction: the Bible is not a book. The Bible is a collection of many different books and writings. The word “bible” itself comes to us through the Latin from the Greek word “*biblia*,” which means “books” and not a single book. And knowing this difference helps us understand the Bible in a whole new light. Our Holy Bible is not a single volume, but a very well-stocked sacred library.

Theologian Matthew Myer Boulton said in one of his podcasts⁴ that when we think of a library we never ask, “***What does the library mean?***” or “***What does the library say?***” We think of libraries as a building, a place, a space full of books where we enter to gain more knowledge, expand our imagination, be surprised, challenged, amused, inspired, and, yes, sometimes even shocked. When we go to a library, we are walking into a larger web of conversations that have been going on for a long time between authors and readers and among the various books on the shelves. The library does not mean or say anything; the authors and the readers are the ones who interact and create meaning together.

We do not stop going to or appreciating and supporting the library – although Moms for Liberty may disagree – because there are too many books in the building that contradict each other or that challenge outdated ideas or preserve ancient stories. This is what a library is after all. It is a space for dialogue where we engage with different levels and layers of ideas and thoughts. We don’t go to the library expecting to find a single book or even a collection of books with a single point of view. There are many voices and many viewpoints on the shelves of the library, plenty that we don’t and won’t agree with ever. All those different voices and dissonant ideas and great stories help us to understand the past a little better, make sense of our present and imagine and compose new stories for the future. No one believes in the library; we value it and so we enter it because in the give and take among the books we join in the conversation as it unfolds and we learn, change, grow and become more enlightened human beings. This is what a library does and offers; and the sacred library we call “the Bible” is no different.

During this Advent season, we have been visiting the houses of the Gospel writers to find out how they tell the Christmas story. We walked into Mark’s house only to find out that the first evangelist sets up a cross decorated with nails in his living room and uses a crown of thorns as his Advent wreath. Mark has no time for Joseph’s dreams or Mary’s song. His beginning of Jesus’ life focuses on the moment Jesus is baptized as a grownup man by a relative, John the Baptist. The author describes John as “***The voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’***”⁵ Mark borrowed these words from the Book of Isaiah. In the Hebrew Scriptures, this passage was meant for the Jewish people living in exile in

Babylon, promising them that they would return home. Mark repurposes the prophet's words to proclaim that Jesus is the Messiah that will liberate God's people from bondage and hopelessness. Right there in the very first Gospel, the Bible is already facilitating meaningful interactions between the authors, allowing them to complement and build on each other.

Matthew and Luke each love to decorate for Christmas. The two evangelists knew about Mark's Gospel, and they both felt the need to tell their own versions of the Christmas story. And they began their stories not with the birth of Jesus, but with the promise that the Messiah would be born.

In Matthew's house, Christmas begins with God's covenant with Abraham. The author puts Joseph, a direct descendant of Abraham and the kings of Israel, front and center. In Matthew's Gospel, a nameless angel speaks to Joseph in a dream, not to Mary. There is no manger in the story because Mary and Joseph are from Bethlehem in the southern region of Judah and settle down in Nazareth only after they return from Egypt. If you pay close attention, there is no detailed birth narrative in Matthew either. All the writer says is that Joseph took Mary as his wife, "***but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son.***"⁶ For Matthew, what mattered most was to make Jesus part of the Jewish Christmas family tree, so the author quotes prophets from the Jewish Scriptures time and over again saying that what happened in the early days of Jesus' life took place "***in order to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet.***" Matthew's goal was to show that the story of Israel was playing out again in the beginning of Jesus' life. Jesus is the new Moses and Joshua. Christmas in Matthew's house is suffused with Jewish Scripture, history and tradition.

Luke's Christmas gives women a prominent role in his story about the beginning of Jesus' life. It is only in Luke that we hear about Gabriel's visit to Mary and about Elizabeth's miraculous pregnancy. Of course, miraculous pregnancies are God's signature move in the Hebrew Scriptures. Luke hoped people would remember the old stories as he wrote the new ones about Elizabeth and Mary and Jesus. The author realized quickly that he had a problem. At the time he was writing, the tradition already claimed that Jesus had been born, not in Galilee, but in Bethlehem, but Luke placed Mary and Joseph in Nazareth. That's where Gabriel showed up to a perplexed teenager. If the old stories were going to be fulfilled in Jesus' life, he had to be born in Bethlehem. Luke solved the problem with the imperial census, which forced Joseph and Mary to be in the southern region of Judah for Jesus' birth.

In Luke's house, Christmas is very concerned about world affairs and politics. The evangelist sets up Jesus as a challenge to the Roman Emperor, calling the Child of the manger "Son of God" and "Savior," titles that Caesar had claimed for himself. In Luke's Gospel, Christmas is filled with lovely scenes of Joseph and Mary, the poor baby without a crib, shepherds and angels, but underneath this heart-warming story, there is

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hope for a radical reshuffling of the sociopolitical order and the great reversal where the hungry is fed and the rich is sent away with empty hands.

Mark, Matthew and Luke are known as the Synoptic Gospels. The word “synoptic” in Greek means “to see together” or “from the same point of view.” The first three books in the New Testament share a great deal in common, follow similar sequences and place the beginning of Jesus’ life at some point in human history, hence the title “Synoptic Gospels.” Only the Gospel according to John zooms out and gives the Church a bird’s-eye view of the Christmas story.

In Christian iconography, the fourth Gospel is often depicted as an eagle, a symbol that may have been given to John by the Early Church Father Jerome who said, “**John the Evangelist... having taken up eagle's wings and hastening toward higher matters, discusses the Word of God.**”⁷ And John does not disappoint, his Gospel soars high above time and space to invite his readers into the Presence of God. In John’s house, the Christmas story only matters because this story takes humanity into the story of God’s love for the whole earth, all creation and all human beings.

The opening line of the fourth Gospel links Jesus’ story to the Book of Genesis when “**in the beginning**” God creates the heavens and the earth.⁸ Rather than worrying about human ancestry, biology and virginity, angels and emperors, the writer of John’s Gospel declares that the story of Christmas – the story about the big love that is stronger than hate, the story about light that darkness cannot extinguish, the story of hope that does not remain trapped under the rubble, debris and ashes of human history, the story of peace that defies the human proclivity for violence, the story of joy that persists even when sadness and fear threaten to overwhelm us – began before the Big Bang, before time and space existed, began in the loving heart of a God who made the world and human life to be peaceful, joyful, hopeful and surrounded by love.

One of the most beautiful lines in all Scriptures is here in the Christmas story told by John, “**And the Word became flesh and lived among us.**” A translation of this sentence that would be a little closer to the original text would sound like this, “**And the cosmic Wisdom of God became flesh and pitched a tent among us.**” It is as if John wanted the church to imagine God moving into the back yard. This is the theological and Christological foundation of our faith. These words are uniquely Christian words. John’s Gospel affirms without any hesitation that God, the Maker of everything, the Creator of life, entered time and space to inhabit a human body in a particular moment, among a particular people, hoping to get the message across to all humanity that Christmas, the story of God’s love, is a gift meant for all of us from the beginning.

Christmas at John’s house is my favorite. It’s true, there is no crèche, magi or traditional carols, but his house is decorated with strings of bright lights that shine in the darkness. The Christmas story in his home invites us into a lifetime of reflection and meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation. John’s Christmas party is a place where

Jesus' life is celebrated not just as a story about a Jewish man who was a great teacher, but the story of a human being who embodies the life-saving essence of God's wisdom.

In 2008, I was serving a church on Chicago's northside. The country was going through the Great Recession. Our neighborhood had been hit hard by unemployment and foreclosures. Immigrants and young families were knocking on the church doors daily, looking for help. Life was enveloped by darkness. The news was grim. People were fearful for their future. The Christmas spirit was much less festive in the neighborhood. Erik and I lived in the parsonage right next door to the church and, that year, we decided to go overboard with the Christmas lights. I put lights everywhere! On the day we were dressing all the bushes in front of the parsonage with netted lights, a Black woman stopped on the sidewalk and said, ***"Thank you for doing this! We need the light. We need more light in our neighborhood."*** Then, she continued on.

The Gospel of John reminds us that we need the light in our lives, where we live, and in the world. The evangelist wrote his Christmas story so we would know that from the beginning we have been loved and, in Christ, in the story of Christmas, we are introduced to a love that will not give up on us, a light that shines in the darkness, in every darkness we may encounter – the darkness of the news about the war in Gaza, the darkness of death and disease, the darkness of loss and grief, the darkness of disappointment and disbelief. At John's house, Christmas reminds us that the world needs more light, and that in the story of Christmas, we find a source of life and light that keeps our faith, hope, the yearning for peace, joy and love alive in our hearts.

Friends, the stories of Christmas in Mark, Matthew, Luke and John are not exactly the same. The writers wrote their stories to different readers. They had different agendas in mind. They focused on different characters and highlighted unique details. The stories are not the same and there are enough inconsistencies and disagreements in their stories to make us wonder which one of the evangelists got the story right. But, again, the four gospels are part of a big library. A library that includes the words from the prophet Isaiah who also promised light to people who walked in darkness. These stories are in dialogue with each other, agreeing, disagreeing, riffing with each other, complementing, expanding and enriching the truth at the heart of Christmas, which is that the story of Christ is the story of God's love in human flesh. So do not try to harmonize the four Gospels. Don't try to be a Bible-believing Christian. We are not meant to believe in the books, but to engage with them. So, embrace the uniqueness of the four Gospels. Walk into each one of the houses of the evangelists and let their words about the beginning of the Good News of Christ fill your life with love and light. Let these old, strange and impossible to believe stories be a gift to you that will make you learn, grow, change and imagine new ways to make Christmas meaningful to others. And this morning, hold on to John's Christmas message, ***"in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it."***

Merry Christmas!

¹ Barna Group in The State of the Bible 2021: Five, 19 May 2021 [<https://www.barna.com/research/sotb-2021/>].

² Wordsrated in 32 Bible Sales Statistics, 02 February 2022 [<https://wordsrated.com/bible-sales-statistics/#:~:text=The%20number%20of%20bibles%20sold,384%2C615%20bibles%20sold%20per%20week>].

³ By Gordon Bess in Bibles are everywhere, but who is reading?, Leader, 07 October 2021, [https://www.myleaderpaper.com/columns/bibles-are-everywhere-but-who-is-reading/article_ed3853ce-25e0-11ec-a7a0-d733fa501b76.html].

⁴ Grateful for the thoughtful reflection of Matthew Myer Boulton in Strange New World, a podcast about understanding the Bible for skeptics, believers and everybody in between.

⁵ Mark 1:3.

⁶ Matthew 1:24-25.

⁷ Quoted in Christian Iconography in St. John the Evangelist: The Iconography, [<https://www.christianiconography.info/john.html>].

⁸ Genesis 1:1