Anticipating Mysteries
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Good stories have a beginning, a middle, and an end. They often begin by setting a context, tell what happened, and end by explaining what it means. However, what actually happened was probably chaotic, disjointed, and with many mixed meanings and messages; which is somewhat unfulfilling in the telling. An oft told story is polished over the years and decades of retelling, becoming far more interesting and meaningful in the process, even while departing further and further from what actually happened. For such stories we need not ask, is this how it actually happened, it's not, but rather, ask what does it mean, is it in some sense true? It often is deeply true and can be life giving.

Christianity began as mystery cult passing down oral traditions about Jesus and his teachings. Decades later, Christians wrote down gospels, not as history or biography, but rather to help initiates find salvation. This morning I'd like to take you on a magical mystery tour of the gospel Christmas stories, beginning with the nature of divine mystery, prophecy, class consciousness, and geography. First a little context:
The Torah describes three ways of experiencing divine mystery:
One: the presence of God, which is so awesome and terrifying it often employs an angelic messenger of God Almighty, creator of the universe;
Second: Ruach, the breath of God, which brings new life; sometimes referred to by Jews as Shekinah, and by Christians as the Holy Spirit;
Third: Logos, or the Word of God, which brings salvation; sometimes referred to by Jews as the coming Messiah and by Christians as Christ.

Now for geography, two thousand years ago, Jerusalem was the location of YHVH's Temple, the site of everything holy, located in Judea where orthodox Judaism was practiced. The much larger northern kingdom, what was the land of Israel, never worshipped YHVH in the Temple, but worshipped him instead on mountain tops, as had their ancestors, and was called in those days Samaria. North and east of Samaria was the Roman province of Galilee, a desperately poor borderland, whose mixed ethnicities and cultures seldom worshipped in the Temple or the mountaintops, but practiced more of a folk religion of wisdom teachers. Three groups in different geographies.

The ancient prophecies concerning the coming of the Jewish Messiah were a mess of contradictions. He would be descended on his father's side from the patriarchs Abraham (to whom God had promised this land), Jacob (father of the twelve tribes of Israel), and Judah (father of all Judeans). He would be of royal blood, of the house of David, yet also be a suffering servant, so from desperately poor peasant parents. He would be called Emmanuel, meaning God is with us, yet would be unrecognized, as one crying in the wilderness. Like the Jews of the exodus, he would come out of Egypt, yet as a child he would be recognized and consecrated in the holy Jerusalem Temple. He would be born king of kings, and Lord of Lords, yet would endure a humble birth with no place for his head, visited only by common shepherds.

You can see the problem the gospel writers encountered. Jesus of Nazareth was a deeply spiritual, illiterate, miracle working, wisdom teacher, who his followers experienced as the fulfillment of the prophecies concerning the Messiah or Christ. Over the years, and then decades, they passed along well-worn stories about Jesus that drew from their own experiences of him, within the context of the ancient prophecies, creating deeply significant good news (gospels) for religious and liturgical practices. These were transformative stories of faith.

Mark's gospel, written earliest, solves the inconsistency problem by skipping Jesus' birth and heritage altogether, jumping ahead to John baptizing Jesus in the Jordan river, where a voice from heaven (the direct presence of God) claims him for his Son. In the gospel of Mark Jesus is a poor humble wisdom teacher from Nazareth in Galilee, and his ministry is conducted mostly in Galilee, and the vast majority of his followers are Galileans. After John is arrested, Jesus proclaims the coming kingdom of God. This gospel is hardly ever used at Christmas.

The Christmas favorite is the gospel of Luke, which builds upon Mark by adding a prequel that addresses more of the ancient prophecies. He introduces Zechariah, a holy priest in the Temple, and his barren wife Elizabeth. The angel Gabriel appears to them, and says they will bear a son named John, whose destiny is to prepare the way for the coming Messiah. Six months later the angel Gabriel appears to an unmarried young peasant girl in the tiny town of Nazareth in Galilee, and says she will become pregnant by the Holy Spirit (ruach), and she will name her baby Jesus. He will be a spiritual being, the son of the Most-High, and the Lord God will give him the throne of his ancestor David. Born of the root of Jesse, he will reign over the kingdom of Israel forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end. This is the exalted kingly claim for Christ.

You can imagine how freaked out this young woman would be. Mary flees to a Judean town outside Jerusalem, where her cousin Elizabeth is married to Zechariah, the holiest and most powerful person she knows. When Mary walks into the room, John leaps in his mother's womb, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit, and proclaims, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb," confirming that Mary bears the messiah. We're told Mary spent three months with Elizabeth, until well after John is born, until she finally gets up the nerve to go back to Nazareth and explain what is going on to her fiancée Joseph. That conversation was probably quite difficult, so for Christmas Eve services we generally jump ahead to the beginning of chapter two.

"In those days a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered." Luke has to get the young couple to Bethlehem in Judea to fulfill a few more prophecies. So, they make their way back to Judea where Mary gives birth in a shed, laying her firstborn son in a manger, because there was no place for him in the inn. Jesus is born as an undocumented alien, a stranger in a strange land. Born a stranger, recognized by shepherds living in the fields, tipped off by angels singing hallelujah in the middle of the night. Christ is born. Eight days later Jesus is named, circumcised, and purified in the Temple in Jerusalem, where a righteous and devout man, Simeon, guided by the Holy Spirit, proclaims Jesus the Messiah. His life purpose fulfilled, Simeon now dies and joins God in heaven.

However, there are prophecies the gospel of Luke fails to address, so, a decade or so later, the gospel of Matthew comes forward with its own birth narrative based upon, but also adding to, Mark. Matthew

begins with a genealogy that includes Abraham, Jacob, Judah, and David, in a descent to Joseph. Oddly, this also includes four of Joseph's supposed ancestors conceived through irregular sexual unions: the twins Perez and Zerah born to Tamar by Judah, Rahab the Canaanite who bore Boaz by Salmon, Ruth the Moabite who gave birth to Obed by Boaz, and King David who fathered Solomon by the wife of Uriah the Hittite. It seems sexual irregularities in service of God are common in this family tree.

In Matthew's telling, Joseph himself noticed Mary was pregnant, and being a righteous man, planned to break their engagement quietly. But an angel of God convinces him she has conceived through the Holy Spirit. Fulfilling the prophecy that "The virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means "God is with us." Matthew adds that after being born in Bethlehem of Judea, the newborn king is visited by three wise men from the East, following a star, bringing gold, frankincense and myrrh. Gold to honor his kingly claims, frankincense to honor his spiritual claims, and myrrh to prepare the way for his death and resurrection. Matthew covers all the bases.

He writes, this fulfills the prophecy that "Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to rule my people Israel." But King Herod, the actual ruler over Israel, freaks out and seeks to kill the newborn king. So, Joseph and Mary flee with Jesus to Egypt, allowing them to fulfill one more prophecy, that "Out of Egypt I have called my son." After Herod dies, they return to Nazareth fulfilling the prophecy that "He will be called a Nazorean." So why all these stories of prophecies fulfilled? They are intended as a spiritual guide for initiates to find salvation.

The gospel of John, the last written, and completely independent of the others, simply declares Jesus is the Logos. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being with him is life, and the life was the light of the people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it." John begins with the nature of divine mystery, and doesn't care about prophecy.

So why this magical mystery tour of these familiar Christmas stories? Well, anticipating mysteries can be confusing, especially when the stories don't match up, and I noticed at last Sunday afternoon's carol sing that we often read or sing carefully curated phrases that attempt, but generally fail, to describe the incredible awesomeness of what happened over two millennia ago. We don't know what actually happened, the stories seem to contradict each other, but I am certain that it is true in the deepest sense. Love abides and brings salvation.

So, we sing, people, look East: Love is on the way. Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come within as Love, as Truth, as Light, as Hope, to dwell. There is a message of mystery, of love, of comfort and joy within these ancient stories. Especially at Christmas time we need Love, Truth, Light and Hope. So, anticipating mysteries, can we unlock the mystery for God to dwell within us? Can we "Let Christmas come, its story told, when days are short and winds are cold, let Christmas come, its lovely song, when evening's soon and night is long…" Oh, let's sing it together, hymn #224, "Let Christmas Come!"