

**Fr. Kevin Connell**

## **Christmas Day Service**

Advent and Christmas are a time for retelling important stories. We retell the stories of the Angel Gabriel's visits to Mary and Joseph, of the Baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling cloths and laying in a manger. We let the TV retell the stories of Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer, Scrooge, and the epic battle of the Heat Miser and the Snow Miser.

But doesn't it seem like there ought to be more stories about Jesus' birth, or at least his childhood? If he's important enough for us organize the dating of all of human history around his birth, shouldn't we know more about what happened when he was born?

Well, if we limit our research to the Bible, there isn't much. The beginning of John's Gospel which we've just heard speaks in cosmically majestic terms of how the Word of God existed with God "in the beginning" but that doesn't tell us much about what Jesus was like as a toddler. Paul doesn't say anything about Jesus' birth or childhood and Matthew and Luke, who are among the few New Testament writers to say anything about Jesus' early life each only give it a couple of chapters.

But there are some other sources out there. There are quite a few very old books—not quite as old as the Gospels, but **old**. Books that **do talk about Jesus' early life**, but which didn't make the cut into the Bible. I would like to share a few stories from those books with you this morning

First, from the “Gospel of Thomas of the Infancy of Jesus”:

*After that, Jesus went through the village, and a boy ran and dashed against his shoulder. And Jesus was provoked and said unto him: “Thou shalt not finish thy journey.” And immediately the boy fell down and died. When the people saw what had happened, they said: “From where was this little boy born, such that every word of his is an accomplished fact?” And the parents of the boy who was killed came to Joseph, and blamed him, saying: “Thou that hast such a child canst not dwell in this village! Teach him to bless and not to curse: for he slayeth our children.:*

*#2 And when Joseph saw what Jesus had done, Joseph arose and took hold of Jesus’ ear and twisted it. Then, Jesus was angry and said to him: “Thou hast done unwisely. Vex me not.”*

*#3 Thereafter they took Jesus to a learned teacher. When he saw Jesus, the Teacher said: Say Aleph. And when Jesus had said Aleph, the master ordered him to pronounce Beth. And the Lord Jesus answered him, saying: “First do THOU tell me the meaning of the letter Aleph, and then I shall pronounce Beth.” And when the master hereupon raised his hand and flogged Him, immediately his hand dried up, and he died. Then said Joseph, to Mary: “From this time we shall not let him go out of the house, since every one who opposes him is struck dead.*

Those are happy little Christmas stories, aren't they?

Why didn't this Gospel—and the three or four others that reproduce these stories—get recognized by the early Christians as having been inspired by God?

Well, I think it's pretty obvious. These stories have nothing about as much to do with who Jesus was as the GILLIGAN'S ISLAND musical version of HAMLET has to do with Shakespeare. The Gospels in the New Testament do disagree on things like how many times Jesus went to Jerusalem, but they all communicate the earliest Christians' experience of Jesus as a man of great wisdom, compassion, intelligence, and insight who always put the needs of other people before his own.

There's nothing like that in these stories of Jesus the totally terrible two-year-old. This Jesus not only does not value others *more* than himself—he doesn't value anything **except** himself. The early Church believed Jesus had miraculous power, but never taught that Jesus used that power to harm anyone. That is why Christians, hundreds of years ago—even though they believed in goofy things like witches and dragons--recognized these stories as junk, and rejected them.

What DO today's actual readings tell us about who Jesus was and is? Like one of my favorite Christmas carols, they tell us, Jesus is the King of Kings. He is "Christ by Highest heaven adored / Christ the everlasting lord." **BUT**, in other places, Scripture also tells us that he's from the Bronze Age equivalent of a truck stop outside Elkhorn, Nevada.

In the Old Testament, the prophet Isaiah describes the coming of the Messiah as “light shining on people who dwell in a land of deep shadow,” and Isaiah has a very specific group of people in mind: “Galilee of the Gentiles.” he call them in Chapter 9. Galilee was in the northern part of the ancient kingdom of Israel, and pagan caravans, traders, and armies were always moving through it. The ancient Hebrews considered Gentiles “unclean,” and since the Galileans were always rubbing shoulders with them, many Jewish people had their doubts about them too.

Remember what the apostle Nathaniel says when his friend Philip tells him that he’s found the Messiah and that he comes from the Galilean village of Nazareth? Nathaniel sort of yawns, and raises one eyebrow the way I used to when some Gonzaga Prep sophomore told me, “Really, I didn’t do ANYTHING, Fr. Connell!” and then he sneers, “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

Well apparently something could. Because Isaiah knew 700 years before Bethlehem had its first after-Christmas sale that God would first reveal his Son, the Prince of Peace, not to emperors and queens in Rome and Alexandria, but to the truck drivers and waitresses at a gas station somewhere in the cold, desolate desert night.

And what’s more, by saying that this Prince of Peace will inherit the throne of his father David, Isaiah reminds us that God has been doing crazy stuff like this since Chapter 3 of Genesis when he booted Adam and Eve out of the Garden but made sure they were dressed warm first.

When Saul, the Israelites' first king, had utterly botched things and the Philistines were going to massacre them as soon as they finished laughing at Goliath's rude jokes about the Israelites' mothers, the prophet Samuel followed God's apparently goofy directions and tottered off to Bethlehem to find a new king at the house of some rancher named Jesse. And each time Jesse brought out one of his tall, handsome, musclebound sons, Samuel thought, "Wow! this guy would be a great king," But each time, God whispered, "Nah" Until He told Samuel to pick the youngest and scrawniest of Jesse's sons, David.

And scrawny little David started off by slaying Goliath. And he finished by giving the Israelites the largest independent kingdom they ever had.

Over and over in the Old Testament, God turns human preconceptions about what is really strong or wise or holy upside down by favoring people nobody would ever expect to be his favorites.

And the New Testament is barely even started before God starts doing it again. Caesar Augustus—the master of the world—the man who conquered Antony and Cleopatra and brought more law and order to the European Mediterranean than it had ever known--is right there in Luke Chapter 2, Verse 1. Augustus gives orders for "all the world to be taxed." What better person to put in charge of announcing that the Son of God had been born?

But God didn't pick Caesar Augustus. Instead, God went with shepherds. God sent hosts of archangels to reveal the

birth of the Messiah to the kind of guys who would have shown up on COPS.

You can just imagine the reaction of the Archangel Gabriel when he got the message to go visit these guys. Gabriel who was in there pushing when Samson brought down the Temple of Dagon on the Philistines' heads, who was playing harmony when Joshua's trumpets leveled the walls of Jericho, and who whistled up the biggest sperm whale in the Mediterranean—just like Aquaman—so God could have it swallow Jonah without a scratch.

Imagine what Gabriel thought when God told him, “OK. I'm ready to do this Messiah thing. See that teenage girl down there?? I want you to go ask her to help me. ----Oh yeah, and then if she says Yes, I want you to find some guys who can't hold any gainful employment except babysitting sheep and tell them about it.”

Gabriel cannot have thought this was a good idea. But he went—maybe because he remembered that the Boss had been smart enough to see that even though he was younger, Abel was a nicer guy than Cain; that scrawny little David had a little more going on upstairs than his big brothers or Goliath on their best days; and that empires are nice for a while, but they have a bad habit of collapsing.

Heck, maybe Gabriel thought this was a great plan. Maybe Gabriel went to Bethlehem because he thought that a bonfire built from jackboots and bloody cloaks instead of houses and books would be nice thing to see for a change.

Maybe Gabriel wanted to see some Shepherds' crooks smashing some taskmasters' poles. Maybe Gabriel went because he'd had his fill of emperors and kings and he didn't want to see a Messiah who killed people for bumping into him and because he knew that palaces might be pretty, but they can also be a lot draftier and more dangerous than stables.