



ST. STEPHEN'S ANGLICAN CHURCH

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Christmastide, December 24th & 25th, 2011

✠ In The Name of The Father and of The Son and of The Holy Ghost. Amen. ✠

One of the most commonly heard criticisms of the Bible today is it doesn't actually prove God exists. That is quite true. The reason for this is God assumes anyone with half a brain ought to be able to figure out that it is highly unlikely this infinitely vast, infinitely complex, yet logically constructed, universe came into being by means of some colossal cosmic accident.

The most plausible explanation for its existence is that there is an intelligence behind creation. In short, the issue becomes not: Does God exist, but Does God care? And this, then, is the question the Bible addresses.

And there is, in fact, no better way to learn just how much God cares than by studying the Gospel accounts of the first Christmas – the event we are celebrating today: the birth of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

The story, of course, begins long before the stable in Bethlehem. Indeed, it goes back to the beginning of time. It doesn't matter whether you think of the story of Adam and Eve as history or as allegory, it contains a vital truth.

This truth is that mankind lost touch with God because of our great fundamental flaw – pride and arrogance. We believed we could do God's job rather better than he can. And, amazingly, after millennia upon millennia of abject failure, we still think we can beat God at his own game.

Frankly, if I were God, I would have dumped all creation down the garbage chute and gone back to the drawing board centuries ago. But that's the first big difference between God and ourselves. He doesn't give up on us, no matter how badly we behave. His compassion is infinite. He never puts us out with the trash.

Instead, God sets about introducing himself to us again. It has been a long and tedious business. First he needs to get somebody to pay attention. Abraham and his family started the process, and the lessons they learned were pretty basic: **(1)** God is one; **(2)** God always keeps his promises, no matter how improbable; **(3)** He doesn't want us to sacrifice our first born just to show him how grateful we are. Not very impressive, you might think.

Next came poor old Moses and Israelites. The lessons they learned were equally uncomplicated: If God tells you to do something, it is **(a)** for your own good; **(b)** the correct answer is: "Yes, sir! Right away, sir!" not "my brother/sister/nephew/niece is better at that sort of thing than me"; **(c)** If God gives you a mission, it doesn't matter how tough it is, he will give the means to see it through.

Actually, I wrong to say the folks had learned these lessons. They didn't in fact learn them. Or rather if they did learn them, they quickly forgot them again – with catastrophic results. But we have no right to look down on them because we have not done any

better. Like Adam and Eve, when things go well we conclude we know better than God – with results as calamitous for us as they were for the people of ancient Israel.

They say that to train a Missouri mule, you must first whack him on the head with a two-by-four just to get his attention. Sadly, humans beings seem to be just like Missouri mules. True, God doesn't often whack us on our heads. But then he doesn't need to. We do it ourselves. God simply incorporates our foul ups into his plan and makes them ultimately turn out for the best.

When, for example, the ancient Israelites declined to take God's advice on the conduct of foreign policy, the entire population was deported – the first wave by the Assyrians and then a second wave by the Babylonians. The events were absolute national disasters.

But centuries later, God used those Jewish communities exiled all over the globe to broadcast the good news of Jesus Christ. In the decade following the resurrection, the Jewish Diaspora had spread the Gospel from one end of the world to the other. The exiled Jews were, quite literally, the light that lightened the gentiles

This, of course, brings us to the great feast we are celebrating today. One of the great ironies of human history is that the prophecy of Jesus Christ's birth in Bethlehem was fulfilled thanks to the machinations of a slick and ambitious politician named Publius Sulpicius Quirinius (Cyrenius in Greek), aided by a team of devious constitutional lawyers.

At the time of Jesus' coming Bethlehem was just a wide spot in the road – a village in the boondocks. Its sole claim to fame was it had been the birthplace of King David. But for 1,000 years folks who, like David, aspired to being something more than hicks, hoofed it ASAP. Yet this was the place the Prophet Micah proclaimed would be birthplace of the Messiah. Because of Bethlehem's obscurity, sensible folks of the day thought it unlikely the Messiah would be arriving any time soon.

God could, of course, have arranged for old Micah's prophecy to be fulfilled by making Joseph – like Mary, a direct descendant of King David – a Bethlehem wheat farmer rather than a carpenter. Instead, he set Joseph and his wife down in an equally obscure village called Nazareth at the opposite end of the country.

At the time of Jesus' birth, the Roman Empire – of which Judea was reluctantly part – was conducting an empire wide census in order to gin up the tax revenue. Judea's wily local pols had staved off the census, and thus the tax hikes for six years – on grounds it would cause massive civil unrest. God, they explained, had conveniently declared that counting the Jewish people was deeply sinful.

Enter Publius Quirinius, newly appointed Imperial Legate and military governor: His career hung on conducting the census unattended by rioting and mayhem. His team of attorneys, searching for a loophole, dug up an obscure Israelite law, dating from the days of the Judges, that stipulated the Jews could be counted only in their tribal capitals. Over the millennium that had passed since the law had been instituted, many of these tribal capitals – like Bethlehem – had fallen into total obscurity.

The rest, they say, is history: The census was conducted at the cost of enormous social upheaval. All over Judea, people were forced to trudge from their homes to their ancient tribal capitals to be counted – Mary and Joseph among them. Jesus was born in a cowshed because it is likely Bethlehem boasted only one small inn. And human nature being what it is – the Holy Family probably had to cough up top dollar to rent that stable.

God, in other words, exploited the most commonplace phenomena to fulfill Micah's prophecy – a government's perpetual hunger for revenue and the fast bureaucratic footwork civil servants use to raise the money. If it had not been for the census, Mary and Joseph would have had no occasion to visit Bethlehem.

One of the lessons to draw from this remarkable story is that each and every one of us has a part to play in God's great work of redemption – even slick politicians, wily lawyers and agile civil servants.

But the most important lesson of all is summed up by St. John, who wrote: "So God loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." *AMEN.*

To the Only Wise God, Our Saviour, be Glory and Majesty, Dominion and Power, Both Now and Forever. AMEN