

Preached by Dr. Carl A. Rush  
Bush Hill Presbyterian Church  
Alexandria, VA 22310  
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Isaiah 63:7–9  
Matthew 2:13–23

## IT IS STILL CHRISTMAS

We've been doing this for centuries: taking the story of the birth in Luke and the story of the birth in Matthew and we've been putting all the details together and making it into one seamless story. So when we look closely we know there are some very unique aspects to each one of the gospel accounts.

We need to be reminded how dangerously close we come to missing the true meaning of Christmas by taking the story together rather than looking at the wonderful gift they give us individually. So let's be clear what happens in each gospel's account of the birth of Jesus. Luke, who's writing to the predominantly non-Jewish audience, and Mark, talking about John the Baptist. Luke has Gabriel coming and doing the wonderful annunciation to Mary. And Elizabeth and Mary in Luke share the Magnificat. There is the birth, but then there are shepherds in Luke. And if we remember what happens after the birth, it's not what we read today in sequence, but first Mary and Joseph go to the temple eight days after Christ's birth for the rites of purification. And in Matthew's gospel more than an emphasis on shepherds, there's an emphasis on angels. We read about that only on Friday. The Magi and the wise men are there. The stars are more prominent and yes, Matthew also has a Herod, but not as prominently as we might think, for there in Matthew, as we've just shown, there's the worship of the wise men and the slaughter of the innocent, the flight to Egypt. And this is no less than four dreams that Joseph has to complete his understanding of God's guidance.

Different details. No wonder we put them all together. It can be quite confusing—Matthew's Jewish perspective and Luke's gentile perspective. But to be sure, we put them together because they agree about so much. There is a miraculous birth and there is the fulfillment of scripture in the details of the birth and for Matthew the years that immediately follow that birth. And there is God, working in every detail, to protect God's family. A miracle and prophecy and providence infuse both accounts. And we shouldn't be that surprised by all of this continuity within the Christmas story.

It sounds a lot like the Old Testament relived. Remember the stuff of Jacob and his son, Joseph, and the dreams that come to them and the interpretations. Remember how Joseph is guided and given wisdom through his interpretations of dreams. Think about the connections between the Joseph so closely connected to Jesus and the Joseph that was there for the nation of Israel in Egypt during the famine—a story of deliverance. Remember how Joseph is the reason they come out of Egypt. God called Israel out of the land of Egypt. Matthew is very familiar with Genesis and Numbers and Deuteronomy and Samuel and his story is filled with this northern tribe's relatives. You know that Nazareth was considered to be part of the northern tribe's heritage. And did you see how in Matthew, God guided Joseph to a northern city so that what had begun in the

Old Testament with all the leaders coming from the north could be lived out again even if, for a moment, Jesus goes to the south to Bethlehem, to the City of David for his birth?

The intricacy and the details are more than fascinating. They are the assurance for all of us that Christmas continues even after the 25<sup>th</sup> of December. And we have the opportunity to gift one another with patience and passion. In these days between Christmas and Epiphany—from now until January 6<sup>th</sup>—we have the opportunity to live Christmas for one another, and we honor the memories of what happened yesterday by the way we respond despite our circumstances, even if we find ourselves in uncharted waters, unplanned surroundings. The same demons which inspired Herod to be such an evil ruler are there to rob us of the Christmas spirit and the Christmas promise: unbridled ambition, self-importance. Yes, it's still Christmas if we, like Joseph, are willing to simply follow our dreams and trust in God's plan, even when it doesn't make any sense.

A 120-mile trip on a donkey, in winter, with no plans for when you arrive. And yet, God makes a way. I recently read about a family who had a tradition for Advent that we might apply now for our time of Christmas cards. It seems that this family took small scraps of wood and created a manger, one that would fit on their table. And every day during Advent (for now I would like us to consider this for every day between now and January 6<sup>th</sup>), the members of the family would come together and share their deliberate acts of kindness towards someone else. And for every example they could give, they added a piece of straw to the manger. So the manger starts out bare and the family then has to put the straw in the manger to welcome Jesus. The warmth of that manger depends on their connection, their quality of life, their deliberate exercises of the faith with those around them.

Twelve days is a lot less than Advent. But what if we took our bare mangers and left them out and only added straw each time we could remember deliberately doing something for someone else that was the opposite of what Herod did. It was the essence of simply showing kindness. Turning the page on the calendar doesn't mean Christmas has to be over. It's that Easter crucible of surrender that we long for, but in order to arrive at Easter there has to be a peaceable center where we have allowed our hearts to be one with one another. For only as we do this, we can truly know God is with us. We cannot have Christmas by putting up a tree and sharing a feast. We have to live it for the next twelve days to remind ourselves that we're approaching the time of Lent. I don't know if it's the twelve days of Christmas for you or if anyone will try the manger experiment, but I would love for Christmas to continue far beyond what is normal in our lives, for you see the Christ event always was meant to be just that: a birth and a maturing into discipleship. So may it be in each of us and all of us together. Amen.