

The God in small things

Luke 2:1-14; Matthew 1:26-38; 2:18-24

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How we love this story. We all know it. People who are not Christians, people of other faiths and those of no faith at all can tell you the story of Jesus, born in a manger and seen by shepherds. We see pictures of wise men and stars galore – everybody knows...not everyone understands.

We have read 2 versions today because it is important to notice differences – the tiny things that tell us a different story. That is, it tells us about the storyteller *and* it emphasises something else important that we might have missed. We all know the Luke story but Matthew – well, this is a story we don't know so well. Matthew doesn't mention any of the details in Luke's story. He starts with a long genealogy linking Jesus to David and then gets down to the nitty-gritty – Mary's embarrassing state and why Joseph didn't run away. This probably isn't the Christmas story we tell our children. Matthew skips the birth details altogether. Next thing we know, the wise men are on the way.

Birth stories are legendary – I would say most families have their fables. Our family story says I was born in a taxi. I'm no. 6 so my parents were a bit *laissez faire* by that's stage. Oh, I'm sure my Dad pounded the waiting room floor, chain smoking for the first 3 babies but by the time I was expected, he had to go out of town on business. According to the story, he supposedly said to my mother, "you know what to do". If anything happens, call a taxi. Well folks, here I am. The legend is that I was born in a taxi.

In Jesus day, tradition was to create fantastic birth stories for all kingly leaders. Grand mythical dramas where God's make babies with maidens and children are created by the loving attention of sacred and powerful animals. Each of the Caesars have a mythical birth story of stellar proportions.

In Luke's story, there is no fanfare. The back-story is all about Mary. Mary has the conversation with God. Mary spends time with Elizabeth. In Matthew, it is about Joseph. It tells us a lot about his character. What happens in the delivery ward doesn't feature.

Luke takes pains to show Mary and Joseph are ordinary people. Unlike a Caesar they are not in command of their universe but instead have humbly and obediently travelled to fulfil their citizen duties. They cannot even command a bed at the inn.

It's when we focus on the tiny things in these stories that you start to notice the difference. Matthews is a man's story – Luke has a more of a woman's view. And there's lots of other little things...and that got me thinking.

Joseph took his family from their home in Nazareth to Bethlehem because he was called to go to 'his own town' as he was from the House of David. That was his ancestral home, his clan. I had to stop and think, why didn't he stay with a sibling or a cousin? Why was he even looking for an Inn? My family would be mortified if I came to town and didn't stay with them. – although it is always less complicated to stay somewhere else.

Maybe it was shame or embarrassment about Mary's condition?

Or Maybe, just maybe, they just didn't have any relatives there...

If you, as a Shannon or a Widomski were called to register in your 'homeland', that is the country of your long-ago ancestors, you might not know anyone either.

So there they are, alone. Mary will not have a sister, a friend or her mother-in-law to help during the birth. That is a very unusual situation. They are experiencing a life-changing moment (a world changing moment) in a completely alien place. I can relate to that – all migrants can.

Christmas time, this whole season, is like that for a lot of people today. I can't help but think of all the refugees around the world, sheltering in foreign lands with foreign customs, longing for 'normal', for home. I think of Ukrainians huddled in basements as the streetscapes outside become increasingly unrecognisable. I think of people in prisons.

And on a lighter side, I think of us. How many of us come from other places and have settled here. We are a nomadic world and only get glimpses of that ancestral hint of belonging. Ever travelled to a place you have never been before and has that 2nd sense of 'home'?

When we do, it shows in tiny details. When I walk through an evergreen forest and smell spruce...or when I walk down a street and catch a whiff of a lemon-scented gum – no matter whether it's in California or Doha.

No matter how alien Joseph and Mary might have felt, when that tiny babe looked up into their eyes, He was home. When they gazed back – they saw God.

We wrap our faith in a tiny, vulnerable babe:
not in an army,
not in an emperor
not in a bank account
or even the power to commandeer a hotel room.

We place our trust in the hands of ordinary people.
As they shared wonder and joy with shepherds who were the fringe dwellers
and outcasts...
They welcomed foreigners and gentiles and so should we.

Let's get real about Christmas – it's not about BIG things: big meals, big presents, big kings.

It's not all big bang, ring-a-ding, major, gob-smacking events...it is small changes that change the world. A tiny babe, a long time ago – in a far-away place - Like a butterfly in the forest, it was the moment silent bells began to ring

across the world and across the centuries.

Softly, softly, in the silence, a tinkling,
the tinkling became a gong
the gong that gathered and spread the word;
the bells that told and tolled of his death
And in the silence left behind,
hope was reborn...

This Christmas – look at the small things, the ordinary... but with new eyes. See hope in smiles
and love in food.

Memorise the faces at the table. Inscribe the laughter (and bad jokes) on your heart.

It is our God in tiny things. Blessings fall so softly they don't make a sound. Look over the head of now-a-day troubles to something small that might just change your view of the world.

Amen