

NOT BETHLEHEM



John 1:45 "Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.' (And) Nathanael said to (Philip), 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?' (And) Philip said to (Nathanael), 'Come and see.'"

Now that Christmas is over I can preach this sermon, which may be upsetting to some of you. It kind of feels like when an adult tells a child that there is no Santa Claus. For despite all our lovely Christmas carols and crèche scenes, I do not believe that Jesus was really born in Bethlehem, and today's Gospel reading is one of primary reasons why I believe that. But I also note that long after we tell our children there is no Santa Claus, we continue to sing songs about him and decorate our houses with his image.

So, the evidence for Jesus' birth in Bethlehem is much less convincing than you might think. In all of the New Testament writings, only the infancy stories in the second chapters of

Matthew and Luke mention Bethlehem as the birthplace of Jesus, and there is no further mention of Bethlehem in either of those Gospels. And there is no other explicit mention of Jesus being associated with Bethlehem in any of the other Gospels, or in any of Paul's letters, or Peter's, or John's, or James's, or the Epistle to the Hebrews, or in the book of Acts, or anywhere else in the New Testament. Moreover Matthew and Luke, though they agree with each other that Jesus was born in Bethlehem, conflict with each other in their stories as to how it is that Jesus was born there.

In Luke's more familiar Gospel, the parents of Jesus lived in Nazareth of Galilee, and thus some specific reason had to be given as to why they were in Bethlehem when Jesus was born --- ah, that famous census under Caesar Augustus that all the world should be enrolled, a census that is otherwise unattested in the historical records of that time, which are extensive, and a census which oddly required individuals to be registered somewhere other than where they were living, again something never before found in history. So Joseph and Mary had to leave Nazareth their home and travel to the city of David for the census, where there was famously no room for them at the inn, and Jesus was thus born in a stable in Bethlehem, as the story goes.

Matthew, on the other hand, tells us an entirely different story. In Matthew's Gospel the parents of Jesus lived in Bethlehem, lived in a house in Bethlehem, not a stable, and that Bethlehem in Judea was their homeland (2:11, 22), not Nazareth in

Galilee as in Luke. It is to this house in Bethlehem that the Wise Men came to find the child (2:11), not to a stable. There in verse 2:11 of Matthew, "On entering the house, (the Wise Men) saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage." Then some specific reason had to be given as to why they left Bethlehem and moved to Nazareth later. So Joseph and Mary and the child had to flee their home in Bethlehem, we are told, when the child was about two years of age, to escape to Egypt because of Herod's slaughter of the holy innocents, an incident which again is not otherwise historically attested in the vast recorded details of Herod's atrocities, and then as you may remember, and these verses are important, Joseph sought to return to their home in Bethlehem after Herod's death, when is warned in a dream not to go there, so that the Holy Family settled instead in a new place, in Nazareth of Galilee.

It is with Nazareth that Jesus' name is most closely connected, as in today's reading. For there are numerous references to Jesus being known as a Galilean from Nazareth (Mk. 6:1, 4; Mt. 13:54, 57; Lk. 4:23, 24; Jn. 4:44), but only these two Gospel chapters suggest that Jesus was instead a Judean born in that little town of Bethlehem. Even the crowd at the synagogue in his own hometown in Nazareth (Mk. 6:2-3), who were amazed at his teaching; who seemed to know Jesus well, seem unaware of any auspicious beginnings. "Is not this the carpenter," they said, "the son of Mary and brother of James and Joses and Judas and Simon, and are not his sisters here with us?" None of his

hometown friends and neighbors betrays any knowledge whatsoever that Jesus had an extraordinary birth in the Davidic city of Bethlehem amidst supernatural signs and wonders and exotic visitors. These neighbors seem instead to be astonished that Jesus has become as famous as he was, precisely because such fame was not evidenced by anything extraordinary in his previous family situation in Nazareth.

How could there have been such a general ignorance of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem, if on the one hand, his parents had escaped the city with their lives and later came from Egypt as strangers with a young child to that small town of Nazareth in Galilee, as in Matthew's account, or else, they would have come back to their home in the village with an infant born to them during a short journey to Bethlehem for the census, as in Luke's story? Both stories would seem memorable.

So back to this morning's Gospel reading. I, for one, have always been surprised by Philip's rather feeble answer, 'Come and see,' to Nathanael's very serious and thoughtful question, 'can anything good come out of Nazareth?' For Nathanael seems to be one of those Jews in Jesus' day that apparently believed that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of Judea. So how could Philip believe that he had found him of whom Moses in the law and the prophets wrote? How could Philip believe he had found the Messiah, in someone who came instead from Nazareth in Galilee?

Later in the seventh chapter of John's Gospel (7:41-2, 52), Nathanael's very same concern is raised again by others in a crowd in Jerusalem. Jesus is there in Jerusalem for the Jewish festival of Booths, and he is teaching in the courtyard of the temple. "Some in the crowd said, 'This is really the prophet.' Others said, 'This is the Messiah.' (Echoing the testimony of Philip in today's reading). But some (some of the Jews gathered there) asked, 'Surely the Messiah does not come from Galilee, does he?' One can almost hear Nathanael's question being repeated again here, "Can anything good come from Nazareth?" "Has not," that group of Jews went on to say, "Has not the Scripture said that the Messiah is descended from David and comes from Bethlehem, the village where David lived?' So there was," we are told in John's Gospel, "a division in the crowd because of him." (Jn. 7:40-44). But if Jesus was really born in Bethlehem, why didn't Jesus, or why didn't one of his disciples for that matter, simply stand up on either of these two occasions in John's Gospel to clarify the situation, to address these serious and legitimate questions about his birth? Why didn't Philip just turn and say to Nathanael, "No, no, you don't understand. Jesus is not really from Nazareth of Galilee. He was born in Bethlehem of Judea, like the Scriptures say, like the prophet foretold.

"Don't you remember the census taken when Quirinius was the governor of Syria? Don't you recollect that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, and how all the world went to their own towns to be registered? Joseph, Jesus' father, traveled at that

time from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem to be enrolled, and Jesus was born then and there. Don't you remember the stories told by the shepherds, or by Simeon or Anna from Jerusalem?

You haven't forgotten the star that shone so brightly in the sky at that time, have you? Don't you remember the tales of those exotic kings from the East who aroused the interest of Jerusalem, we are told, or the slaughter of innocents in Bethlehem by Herod the King? Don't you recall the things that Elizabeth his aunt and Mary his mother kept in their hearts? Don't you know any of these stories? Don't you remember?"

Why didn't Philip or someone else speak up like that, if Jesus was indeed born in Bethlehem? Why did they leave these important questions unaddressed and unanswered? Did they not really know any of these stories? Were they all as unfamiliar to Philip, as they appear to have been to Nathanael? It would seem at times that it must have been so.

Nathanael's question and that from the crowd in Jerusalem raised a serious and significant dilemma for the early Church, as many of the Jews of Jesus' day did indeed expect the Messiah to be born in Bethlehem, that's how they interpreted that familiar passage in Micah (Micah 5:2) at that time. But there was another group of Jews who didn't see those verses as messianic, who understood them to foretell of the birth of good King Hezekiah. This is why there was a division in the crowd because of Jesus. For in that story, it continues: "Now some of the people of

Jerusalem were saying, 'Is not this the man whom they are trying to kill?' And here he is, speaking openly, but they say nothing to him! Can it be that the authorities really know that this is the Messiah?' Yet we know where this man is from; (one group says), but when the Messiah comes,' they go on, "no one will know where he is from." For there was another prophecy, this time in Malachi (3:1) which declared that the Messiah would appear suddenly and unannounced, and no one would know where he was from.

Our Gospel infancy stories suggest that the other group, those who relied on the Micah passage, became dominant later, at the least at the time of the writing of the Gospels, those who believed the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem. Consequently many biblical scholars suggest that the unverified stories of Jesus being born in Bethlehem were later simply made up to address these concerns. The stories of Jesus being born in Bethlehem were invented as a means of Christian apologetics against Jewish ridicule of a Messiah who came from Nazareth in Galilee.

However, in the end, does it really matter to us where Jesus was born? Is it essential to our faith that Jesus be born in Bethlehem --- important enough to make up such stories --- or to insist that we must believe them? Many would say so. But it is here, perhaps, that Philip's answer in today's reading makes so much more sense. "Nathanael, Nathanael, you are worrying about details;" Philip seems to be saying, "you are too focused on the

wrong things. Who cares where Jesus was born? 'Come and see,'" he says instead. "Come and see" him for yourself, Nathanael. Get to know Jesus first, before you judge him by any other standard. Just come and see --- for when you have done so, none of these other details will really matter. AMEN.