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Christmas - was it worth it?  
Sydenham-Heritage United Church  
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by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 2:13-23

Once again, the Christmas we had been looking forward to is now something in our past. Presents have been opened. Toys have been played with. Perhaps some toys are already broken. Turkeys and trees have made their sacrifices for our family rituals. Families and friends have met, shared meals, shared lives. All the hustle and bustle leading up to Christmas is not over. Why did we even bother to come here today? This service is what I like to call “the big sigh after Christmas”. Let’s do that together. Make a big sigh. Thank you!

Think back to all the effort and energy that went into all our Christmas preparations. The stress of shopping. The panic of making meals when you realized you did not have all the ingredients after all. The reading of stories, like “The Night Before Christmas” to our children. Think of everything you did in the last month because the word “Christmas” was on the calendar. Not to mention all of the energy and activity that we did together as a congregation. I loved the sharing at our video production club. I always really love the special services we have here. Including our time at Victoria Park last week. Whatever else you might say about it, Advent is certainly a journey.

[image: did you get what you wanted for Christmas?]

And thinking of all that - was it worth it? The question from the school yard is just as relevant to adults, although adults think of it differently. But it is still relevant to ask - “Did you get what you wanted for Christmas?” As children, the things we want are usually actual presents. But as we age, our desires change. Perhaps what you wanted was simply to enjoy family gatherings. But even so, did you get what you wanted for Christmas? Was it worth it?

[image: gospel of Matthew]

I hope you are not so overdosed on sugar that you mis-heard today’s readings properly. Because they are quite interesting, don’t you think? Particularly the reading

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from Matthew which gives an account - the only account there is - of Herod trying to kill infants. It raises such interesting questions. The most obvious question - to me - is why is Joseph named so many times in that story, but Jesus and Mary are not. They are just called “the child and his mother”. We like to think that the nativity is about Jesus, so why is Joseph the only actor at this point in the story? Another question is, if Herod killed all the children under 2 years old, how did Jesus’s cousin, John the baptizer, survive? John and Jesus were only 3-6 months apart in age after all. Another question is, why is there a reference to “the land of Israel” when Israel did not exist as a state during the life of Jesus? Jesus was born in Palestine. But perhaps the best question is, what is motivating the author of Matthew to write this story anyway?

I have always been fascinated by the nativity stories in the different gospels.

The gospel of Mark is perhaps the most interesting. Mark decided that Jesus did not require a birth story at all. The story in Mark begins when Jesus is baptized ... at - we assume - around the age of 30. And clearly, that worked for Mark. Sometimes, simpler is better, right?

The gospel of Luke is the nativity story I relate to the most. In Luke, the nativity is all about poor people, disenfranchised people, women, people with no social status, people who suffer with mental health. In Luke, the angel speaks to Mary and Mary’s reaction gives us the poem called the “Magnificat”. In Luke, the angel speaks to poor, uneducated shepherds who go to see Jesus and then go home singing praises to God. In Luke, the spirit speaks to Anna and Simeon in the temple. Anna and Simon are people who today would be considered homeless and perhaps suffering from mental health.

And finally, and in massive contrast with Luke, we have the gospel of Matthew. Matthew’s nativity story is all about power and money and men. In Matthew, the angel speaks to Joseph, not to Mary. In Matthew, the people who confirm Jesus’s identity are rich, wise men from another land. Not common local people as in Luke. These men leave gifts representing opulence and power. And they are so out of touch with the real world that they do not realize how inappropriate their gifts are. They are certainly not as wise as we make them out to be. In Matthew, we hear about the powerful man, Herod, who we read about today. And in Matthew, the story about baby Jesus being displaced is all about

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what Joseph does, not what Jesus or Mary do. In the text we read today, Jesus is essentially baggage, luggage taken on a journey. So what did motivate Matthew to write such a story.

Biblical scholar Frances “notes that the Old Testament quotations in this chapter [in Matthew] are ‘notoriously obscure and unconvincing.’. Many of them are heavily modified from the originals, with some passages being reversed in meaning. Almost all of them are taken out of context, and presented as prophecy when they were not in the original [text]. The most confusing is that cited in Matthew 2:23, [‘he shall be called a Nazorean’,] which does not appear anywhere in the Old Testament. [The Church father] Jerome associates it with Isaiah 11:1, where the etymology of Nazareth is derived from the Hebrew word for branch (ne'tser). That the quotations have been so contorted to fit the narrative, is to Frances and others, clear evidence that the narrative came first, and the quotations were added after.”

In other words, Frances and other scholars agree with me. That in Mathew, Jesus is like luggage being taken on a journey. Matthew’s nativity was created to fit Matthew’s theology rather than historical facts. “The difficulty with the brief quote ‘he will be called a Nazarene’ is that it occurs nowhere in the Old Testament prophets, or any other extant source. A number of theories have been advanced to explain this. At the time the canon was not firmly established and it is possible that Matthew is quoting some lost source, but all the other quotations in Matthew are from well known works, and if a quotation so closely linking Jesus’ hometown and the Messiah existed it would likely have been preserved.”

Most biblical scholars believe that Matthew crafted his nativity narrative as a way of “preaching to the choir”. In other words, this narrative with its refrain of ... this happened ... so that this prophecy would be fulfilled in Jesus ... was not meant to convince outsiders that Jesus was messiah. It was only intended to provide a narrative vehicle for people who already believed that Jesus was messiah. It was not meant to be a convincing argument. It was only intended to be a way to telling a story in a way that Jesus’s fan club would identify with. It was 99% narrative and 1% history.

Actually, I think that Matthew simply fell into the trap that most of us fall into

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ourselves at Christmas. Throughout Advent this year I have been droning on about looking for Jesus in our midst, and reminding you that you may not find Jesus in the form of a baby this year. You need to look more broadly than that. But I know for a fact that many of us have instead focused on a baby, and have also focused on memories from our past. We have received an invitation into our future, but we find the past more comforting. That's human nature for you. Matthew did this too, and instead of looking to see who Jesus actually was, Matthew created a birth story that related to Matthew's past and the expectations of Matthew's own community - based on the past.

Matthew desperately wanted to imagine that Jesus was the Jewish messiah. So he wrote the story that way. Making these "connections" that Jesus was messiah, connections like the idea that Jesus will be called out of Egypt, and that he will be called a Nazorean.

Now to be honest, Jesus did fulfil some of the expectations of the awaited Jewish messiah. We can find long lists of arguments that Jesus fulfilled Old Testament prophecy with irrelevant "facts". Like the messiah would be a man. That he would be Jewish. That he would be born in Bethlehem. That he would be called "Immanuel". That he would speak in parables. That children would like him. That sort of "messiah" was dinarius-a-dozen in Palestine at that time.

Perhaps we need to remind ourselves of what the anticipated Jewish messiah was supposed to do. What was the anticipated messiah going to achieve, anyway? Jewish people were waiting for a messiah to free them from Roman rule. Some specific expectations of the messiah were to:

[image: following 3 bullets]

- Build the third temple (Ezekiel 37:26-28)
- Gather all Jews back to the land of Israel (Isaiah 43:5-6)
- Usher in an era of world peace, and end all hatred, oppression, suffering and disease. As it says: "Nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall people learn war any more" (Isaiah 2:4).

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In the New Testament, Jesus clearly achieved none of those objectives. And we should imagine that the New Testament is either an accurate picture of what Jesus did, or it has been embellished. Jesus either did what the gospels say he did, or he did less than that - not more. We cannot imagine that Jesus brought an era of peace, but the gospel authors forgot to mention it! Some Christians argue that Jesus will fulfill those expectations when he returns at the “second coming”. But there are 2 good reasons why that thinking is not grounded in history:

Not only did Jesus not fulfill the expectations of Jewish messiah, but he did not even talk about wanting to do them. Jesus never criticized the Roman occupation verbally, let alone attack it physically. Jesus reserved his harshest criticisms for uncaring religious leaders. Jesus didn't seem to care at all about the Roman occupation.

[image: inner peace]

Jesus frequently spoke about bringing peace. But Jesus spoke about bringing inner, spiritual peace to individual people. Jesus imagined a “salvation” that was not corporate (e.g. salvation for a group of people from oppressors) but rather a salvation of individual spiritual peace. Jesus freed people in the present, he did not just promise them freedom in some hypothetical and distant future.

In short, Jesus was not the Jewish messiah, but Matthew created his own narrative and stuffed Jesus into it. Matthew treated Jesus like luggage.

And believe it or not, that is not a criticism of Matthew. Matthew was simply one of the first in a long line of people who created Jesus as the image of what their deepest longings required. And then assigned Jesus to fill that role. We still do that today. I would argue that each of us here - including me - continue to do that today. And we have to, because how else will Jesus be the answer to how we cope with our deepest longings? Are any of us hoping to be liberated from Roman rule? Really? No, we have different problems now. But we still need salvation - whatever you think that word means.

Some of us have created an image of Jesus as our best friend. Some of us have created an image of Jesus as a social justice warrior. Some of us have created an image of Jesus as a political activist. Some of us have created an image of Jesus as someone who would fight to preserve traditions. Some of us have created an image of Jesus as a man in

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the sky (white beard optional). Some of us have created an image of Jesus as something we know does not work just so that we can reject the image entirely.

Matthew reminds us that Jesus is relevant to us because Jesus satisfies our deepest longings, whoever we are.

[image: did you get what you wanted for Christmas?]

Jesus was not the Jewish messiah. Fortunately, he did not need to be. Jesus reminds us that peace is possible. Jesus shows us that God is present with us. Jesus lived out the vision that all people matter equally. If we fully accepted that, what else do we really need for Christmas?

Was Christmas worth it? I sincerely hope that your answer matches mine - which is, yes! We just need to live that out. Here. Now. 2023 awaits. And it will be awesome.

*Amen.*