



Are You Prepared to Be Shocked by Christmas?

Advent 4

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Oscar Romero *Liturgies of Life*, p 103

Luke 1:26-30

This week we return to what we have come to consider the traditional Christmas stories. Last week it was all about John, kinsman of Jesus, pointing toward the one who would come to change the world as it was known and experienced. As we know from our place in history that was Jesus of course. Jesus born a few months after John.

Today we have part of Luke's nativity story offered to us for consideration. This is a story which was undoubtedly shocking in its day. Many contemporary commentators are dating its origin in the first decades of the 2nd century CE, decades later than earlier scholars thought. Unlike Matthew's birth story (which was probably written in the 70s CE) with its focus on Herod's plot to kill the baby, Luke's story is focussed on Mary, and the joyful hope and expectation surrounding the birth of her first child. In Luke's story Jesus is born while his family were travelling, he was laid in a manger, and the angels who announced his birth visited outcasts – shepherds and also a group of non-typical women: Elizabeth, the up to this point childless older woman; Anna the woman of 'great age' (84) who never left the temple and proclaimed the redemption of Jerusalem, and Mary, the young unmarried woman who was to give birth. Luke has a concern for the poor and the oppressed, the marginalised including women. Who was the writer 'Luke' trying to shock, and why?

I think these are important questions for us to face five days away from Christmas.

The Christmas story as we have come to celebrate it, with all the attendant consumerism and 'feel-good' expectations, is not what Luke or Matthew were pointing toward. Christmas as a Christian festival did not show up in the records till the early decades of the 4th Century when Pope Julius I set the date for the celebration as 25th December! The decorated trees, and cards and feasting and gift exchanging that is now part of the tradition entered the picture in the Victorian era in the 19th C with Dickens and Albert. There had been a lull in celebrations for bit before that, when the Protestants banned the celebration – it was non Biblical after all and emphasising non-Christian priorities!

The stories telling of Jesus conception, birth and early years that Luke shapes for us in his first two chapters, are setting the scene for the rest of his gospel. He, of all the gospel writers, speaks most clearly about the place of women and other marginalised people; he also points toward the enlivening action of the Holy Spirit amongst those for whom Jesus has a concern. *He wants us to be very clear, that this man, Jesus, from his very conception, is a man of God: one who en-fleashes the Spirit of God and in whom we see the good news of God enacted.* He is full of the potential to be found in humanity. Jesus is one who should be listened to, and his vision for the wellbeing of human communities embodied in lives which endeavour to follow the priorities he sets out – those same priorities recited by his Mother prior to his birth, according to Luke's story! It could be said Jesus was 'rallying a disheartened people'. We know times then were tough under Roman occupation. Jesus was offering a vision of how to be community together offering a reminder of God's presence amongst the peoples of the earth and declaring they should not be afraid. Luke wants to shift his hearers from despair to hope, from pain to joy – it would seem he wanted to shock them from complacency.

Times are tough for so many in our world today too. And given our experiences of recent decades things could get a lot tougher! In such time

as these it seems to be a very human response to draw our loved ones close, seek to protect ourselves and those close to us from things getting worse. We can readily slip into reacting to others not of our families, and to our world, out of fear. Our clever human brains have developed a world in which amazing things are possible; things the people of Jesus' day, and Luke's time could not have imagined ... but those clever brains that offer us so much have also set us on a path for destruction, for annihilation, unless we turn them from simply managing our demise in the least painful way to opening up a future in a generous and hopeful way. Somehow or other we need the confidence to live with expansive generosity rather than fearful accumulation where we gather together as many resources as we can, just in case!

It seems to me, responding to Luke in our own time, we need to allow ourselves to be shocked – derailed as it were from business as usual, from believing we are able to control all things.

Not shocked by stories of old women and virgins giving birth – that's easily within the realm of possibility today: a couple of weeks ago we read about a 64 year old woman birthing a child, and there are all sorts of conception techniques available today that shift reliance on basic human biology.

So what does have the capacity to shock us from our complacency today, from our behaviours that endanger the survival and growth-systems of planet earth; from ways that lead us to imagine we are in control of our world and can manage the future wellbeing of the earth and all its creatures including ourselves. Even our experiences during our own lifetimes should warn us we are not managing it well – there is a climate crisis and a world pandemic upon us, there is widespread food insecurity, desperation and despair amongst many peoples while the wealth gap grows.

Luke focuses his opening chapters on the Baby Jesus. But his story is not about a baby. Rather it is a story, shocking in its elements, that points toward hope, toward the possibility of change, toward what *we can do if we act with the bravery of love en-fleshed in us*. As Luke unfolds his Gospel, his good-news of God is seen in the life and person of Jesus, he is pointing toward the capacity of human communities to care for each other, to heal themselves, to live together with peace because justice is their hallmark.

The awakening shock is that the potential, focussed at Christmas in the baby in a stable, ('the word made flesh and come amongst us' as John's Gospel declares it), is also in you, and in me.

We too en-flesh the life-giving God-gift.

We can't step away from it.

If we want our relationships with others in our communities to be different, if we want everyone to have enough, if we want a future for generations to come, then it is us who have to keep the pressure up on our decision makers, it is us who have to bend our brains and our hearts with courage to admitting we don't know it all, to being willing to change and to be willing to look toward people who are different from ourselves who might be inviting us to consider the gifts en-fleshed in them.

We are not God – we are not homo Deus – as we so often seem to think we are – but nevertheless, together we are the ones in whose hands lies the gift of life.