

## **“Really Matters What”**

by Ben Banks

Sunday, December 29, 2019

Christmas is a most holy season and is filled with many traditions and customs. They vary from family to family and from church to church and usually have, at their center, a celebration of Christ's birth. As a youth, presents were very nice but giving was also very fun. It was a time to think about friends and family and try to give presents they would like and not just what you would like. My church always told the Christmas story and sang lots of carols. My church also had a “God said it—King James wrote it—” I believe it!” attitude. The Bible was taken very literally. There was no theme like “God is still speaking,” or “There is more to come”. By the time I was 10 or 11 years old, I had started to question some of the stories. One was the story of the three kings. I figured that if they were from the orient and followed the star in the east, they would be heading away from Bethlehem. I was also taught that the “kings” arrived at the Manger at the time of Christ's birth. Angels, shepherds and animals were all there. Look at any nativity--They're all there. But now I read that scholars believe it took up to two years for them to get to Bethlehem. This explains why Herod slew all boychildren under two years old.

As I grew older, I learned that traditions such as the Christmas tree were really adopted from pagan practices. I read that nobody really knew when Jesus was born --that December 25, was just selected.

I had also been taught that all the “red” in the red-letter edition of New testament were direct quotes from Jesus. This suggested that the New Testament had been written at the time of Christ by people who knew Him personally. Then as an adult I discovered that the new testament was written many years after Jesus's death---like 1 or 2 hundred years after it!

I remember a game---I think it was called telephone--- where you whispered a message to one person then he or she whispered it to the next and so on around the classroom. The original message never made it completely intact. How could the Christ story survive that number of years?

Fast forward to retirement—mine. I started reading a lot of religious philosophy and discovered a wide variety of interpretations and suggestions of what had occurred over the years. It seemed that each writer had a somewhat different take on history. But one thing stayed constant---the ideas Jesus taught seemed to stay the same. That Jesus taught to love your neighbor as yourself--to do unto others as you would want them to do unto you—These things stayed constant. And then, by the luck of the draw, I agreed to deliver the message for today. Believing that I should try to follow the lectionary (thank you Linda for getting it to me early on) I read it. Psalms 148 seemed very straight forward—everything on earth should praise the lord—He created everything. Some of us believe He created everything in six 24-hour days and some of us believe He created everything over millions of years and is still creating. But most of us, in any faith, believe He is the creator, although we may call Him by different names.

Then I got to Mathew 2:13-23. The kings, magi, wisemen---have departed—Joseph has a dream in which he is told to take his family and escape to Egypt because Herod is planning to kill all the children in and around Bethlehem.

I have long wondered –why Egypt? How long? -- what happened there?

The first question is answered in today's reading. It was so that the prophecy, "Out of Egypt I have called my son" would be fulfilled. But Some scholars suggest other reasons.

Egypt had established Jewish centers where Jesus could be taught the history of his people in preparation for his calling. This makes sense in that the next significant reference to Jesus in the Bible finds him in the temple in Jerusalem where he is—talking to the Elders--Amazing with his wisdom. Yet the gospel of Thomas, one of the Gnostic gospels not included in the Bible, presents a different picture. It suggests that Jesus had Godlike powers even as a young child. Playing in mud on a sabbath, he formed several sparrows out of mud. When he was chastised for doing this on the Sabbath, he clapped his hands—the sparrows took flight and flew away. The gospel of Thomas relates several other incidents which indicate that Jesus' powers were there from his beginning and his knowledge and powers were innate, not learned.

The third question how long the stay in Egypt was is also up for grabs. Revelations 12:4-5, sets the time at 1260 days—about 3.5 years

In my early church training, I was taught that Jesus returned to Israel when he was basically, middle school aged (12 stands out in my memory). This coincides with many modern church practices of preparing youth for church membership at about that age. It is also supported by the Gnostic Gospel of Thomas which cites age 12 as the time when Jesus was in the Temple amazing the Elders with his wisdom. My readings suggest that scholars have concluded that the time in Egypt was anywhere from a few months to several years.

Then Joseph had another dream that Herod had died, and he should bring his family back to Israel. but still another dream said that Herod's son had become the new king, so Joseph went to Nazareth instead of Israel. Thus, fulfilling another prophecy---That the son of God would be called a Nazarene. This all leads me to think that the Christ story may have been created to fit a preconceived set of prophecies.

But you know what---Life events can change your perspectives. Many things have happened during my life which have no other explanation than---God's watching. I'm here today because God's watching.

I've had many doubts and questions, but I now believe that God is, watching—that in all the books I've read—that in all the experiences I've had, the Christ story is real. That's what really matters. Through all the retellings, translations and interpretations, the Christ story survives. He was the original open and affirming person. He accepted and worked with everyone. Praise the Lord all the earth.