

Today Could be Your Bethlehem

Matthew 2:1-12

First Sunday in Advent, December 2, 2018

Dr. Michael Helms

I have a pastor friend that was adopted into a wonderful family as a baby. His parents never hid the fact from him that he was adopted. They wanted him to embrace the story of his life and of their love for him and process it as he grew.

There came a time in my friend's life that he felt the need to search for his biological parents. He wanted to fill in some unanswered questions. He knew where he was born, but nothing else about the circumstances of his birth.

He wanted to know his medical history, the circumstances surrounding his birth, and the reason he was given up for adoption. He wanted to know if his biological parents were alive. Would they speak with him? Did he have any half brothers and sisters?

He purchased an Ancestry.com kit, and he was able to find a close relative that eventually led him to his birth mother.

Recently, his birth mother and three half-sisters drove down from Pennsylvania to meet him, with the blessings of his parents. So far, his biological father has not responded to his efforts for conversation.

I've often wondered about how Jesus processed the information about the uniqueness of his birth.

It is clear that the gospel writers want us to see where Jesus came from. They want us to know that he was unique. He was both from heaven and the lineage of King David.

These gospel writers want us to see that even before Jesus was born, God was at work in Jesus' life and had a plan for his life. And at some point, Jesus had to come to this realization and understanding of this himself.

Luke tells us that while Mary was pregnant, Joseph and Mary were forced to leave their home in Nazareth to travel to Bethlehem because the "Roman emperor, Augustus decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire." (Luke 2:1)

Each man had to return to his place of birth.

Joseph had to travel to Bethlehem because he was a descendant of David. David, the greatest king of Israel, was from Bethlehem of Judea, so Joseph and Mary had to travel about 80 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be counted in the census.

The gospel writer Matthew pointed to a Hebrew reference from the prophet Micah: “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” (Matthew 2:6)

This passage was known by the leading priests and teachers of religious law during that time.

The Magi may not have had access to this text. But what they did have was a sensitivity to God’s Holy Spirit. They had been led as far as Jerusalem by a star.

Don’t confuse this the kind of horoscope guidance people believe in today. I don’t care what star you are born under. The idea that the stars somehow have some powerful pull on you so that you are going to always respond according to that star’s characteristics is ludicrous.

If that were true, one out of every twelve of us are going to respond and react similarly and have similar tendencies just because we were born in the same month of the year. There will always be enough coincidences that happen that some people are going to become believers in horoscopes.

Why would we ever follow such a human-made system in making our decisions when we can follow God’s word, which is “God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness (2 Tim. 3:16)?

The wise men followed a star, not because it gave them some kind of manmade answers to their daily questions, but because it gave them navigational direction.

When King Herod called a meeting of the leading priests and teachers of religious law, he asked, “Where is the Messiah supposed to be born?”

They didn’t say, “Just keep following that star.” They looked to the scripture.

They told him that Micah the prophet said that he’d be born in Bethlehem.

Bethlehem was only about six miles from Jerusalem, so the Magi continued on their journey. The King told them to come back and tell him where he could find the newborn king so he could worship him as well. But that was not Herod’s intent. He intended to kill Jesus.

King Herod didn’t have any use for the Hebrew scriptures. He was a jealous and ruthless King who would not tolerate any competition to his throne, not even from a newborn child.

God warned the Magi in a dream not to return to Herod, so they did not.

When Herod knew they were not coming back, he ordered a search for all the Hebrew children under the age of two in the Bethlehem area to be killed.

But Joseph, Mary, and Jesus had already left Bethlehem.

Joseph also had a dream. In his dream, he was told to carry his family to Egypt until the time of danger had passed.

Of course, all of this took place before Jesus had any awareness of who he was.

Psychologists tell us that children begin to develop a sense of self-awareness around 15-18 months.

One experiment you can do with a child this age is to apply a red dot to his or her nose and set him or her in front of a mirror and see if the child reaches for the mirror or his or her nose. Those that reach for their noses demonstrate that they are beginning to be self-aware.

It is our job as parents to help our children become aware of who they are.

Who are they? They are beloved people made in the image of God, blessed and chosen of God before the creation of the world to be his children through his son, Jesus Christ, who came to redeem us from our sins.

The parents of my friend allowed him to understand from a very early age that he was adopted. It never changed or affected his love for them because they were always his parents. They knew that one day he would likely want to find his birth parents. They were not threatened by that but were happy and thankful to be a part of the process.

Our children need to understand as early as possible that it is God who made them, God who loves them most, and God who redeems them through his son Jesus.

What we want as parents are for our children to continue to grow in their self-awareness because while God made us, the Bible teaches that all of us have rebelled. The Book of Daniel says, "We have sinned, and have done what is wrong and wicked, and have rebelled, even turning aside from your (his) commandments and from (his) your ordinances" (Daniel 9:5 New Heart English Bible).

This is all part of the reason Jesus was born in Bethlehem. He came to take away the sins of the world.

O holy Child of Bethlehem,
Descend to us, we pray.
Cast out our sin, and enter in;
Be born to us today.

The process of self-awareness continues throughout the years we mature. If we develop a healthy self-awareness, we not only understand how we relate to others, but we understand how we relate to God.

Scripture is very clear that as a part of our relationship with God, there must be a new birth experience. There must be a point in our lives that we consciously choose God.

We were not able to choose our biological parents. We were not able to choose the circumstances around our birth. But as we age, we do decide whether we want to have a relationship with our parents.

God chose existence for us. We had no choice in that matter. But as we age, we do decide whether we want to have a relationship with the God that created us.

Jesus is different, in that he is the only person ever born that chose to be. Jesus was not created. Jesus was not the result of any normal intimate process between a man and a woman.

Jesus was present in heaven as a part of the Godhead before his birth.

This is what John the Baptist meant when he said, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me’” (John 1:15 English Standard Version).

So Jesus left heaven and entered the limits of time and space for our sakes.

We see Jesus’ self-awareness continuing to grow in a story in Luke’s gospel, which contains the only passage of scripture about Jesus’ life as an adolescent.

Jesus and his family had traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem, a place very near Jesus’ birthplace. They went there every year to celebrate the Passover.

This was the year that Jesus became a man, according to Jewish custom. Families would have traveled from Nazareth to Jerusalem in large groups. On the return trip, Mary and Joseph must have thought the other had Jesus in their sights. They traveled a long distance before they realized he wasn’t with the other group.

They returned to Jerusalem to look for him, and when they found him, the Bible says, “he was “in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions.”

⁴⁷ Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. ⁴⁸ When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, “Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” ⁴⁹ “Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” ⁵⁰ But they did not understand what he was saying to them. (Luke 2:47-50)

This passage reveals to us that at age twelve, Jesus was very aware of who he was and of his relationship with God.

At some point, Jesus came to understand the uniqueness of who he was and the role he had to play in this world.

Was this fully developed at age 12? I don't think so.

He may have still been evolving in his self-understanding as late as the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus knelt and asked God for the cup of suffering to pass him, yet he was willing to do whatever God asked of him.

As a boy, think of all the things that must have occurred for Jesus to come to an understanding of who he was. Here is a lot of things that likely would have happened.

Mary would have told him about the angel coming to her to share about how she was going to be with child.

Joseph would have told Jesus that while he was his father, he was never intimate with his mother before he was born and that she had never known another man before they were married.

He would have told Jesus that he knew this was true because an angel came to him and confirmed it. Otherwise, he would never have believed it or married her. Jesus' conception was through the Holy Spirit of God.

Mary would have told Jesus about the special bond she and cousin Elizabeth had, a woman who became pregnant in her old age and about her husband Zachariah the priest, who could not speak until their child John was born.

Mary would have told Jesus how difficult it was to return to Nazareth after that, obviously pregnant, to the stares of others, unsure of what Joseph might do when he found out.

She would have told him about the goodness of Joseph and how he loved her and stood by her, especially after the angel came to him and told him about her pregnancy.

Mary and Joseph would have told Jesus why he was born in Bethlehem and not Nazareth.

We have no history of these things, but it's likely to have occurred this way. It would have been a natural part of Jesus understanding who he was.

Since Bethlehem was only six miles from Jerusalem, I wonder if Mary and Joseph ever walked to Bethlehem during their journeys to Jerusalem during the Passover.

I wonder if they every took Jesus back to visit the place where he was born. Do you think they told him the stories of how Magi and the Shepherds came to worship him that night?

I think Mary would have shed tears with him as she told him about all the mothers that lost their children in that area and why they were able to escape to Egypt when others were not.

At some point, Jesus came to terms with who he was.

It's one thing for prophets like Micah, Isaiah, and Jeremiah to proclaim your coming. It another thing to come to a conclusion that is who you are.

Jesus embraced his role and purpose for being born in Bethlehem so that you and I could embrace our purpose and understanding that we must be born anew.

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus was aware that it was his purpose to lead us and show us how to live an abundant life, filled with compassion for others, loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength, and showing us how to love our neighbor as we love ourselves.

At some point, each of us has to come to terms with who we are and make some decisions about who we want to be.

And who are we?

We are flesh and blood, mortal beings, made in the image of God. We are sinful people, separated from God, because of our sin, but not from his love. Nothing can separate us from God's love, which is evident in the love God showed to us through the life, death, and resurrection of his son Jesus.

The biggest question is whether we are redeemed. Has God reclaimed us by our admission of our sinfulness, by our belief in Jesus as our Lord and Savior, and by the public confession of our sin?

It is essential for us as adults to give our children every opportunity to hear God's call on their lives.

Are they aware of who they are and are they learning to listen to God's voice?

Some people didn't have the opportunities as a child to come to Jesus.

That person might be you this morning.

Just as Jesus continued to struggle with aspects of his journey up till the cross, that's where we live too.

What are you struggling with today?

You may know the facts surrounding your physical birth, but the most important thing is whether you have been born of the Spirit.

Jesus once spoke to a very religious man named Nicodemus, and he was trying to get Nicodemus to be aware of who he was.

Nicodemus thought he knew who he was. He was a Pharisee and a very holy man. He was a man that had studied the Law and tried to keep it diligently. But something was missing, and he knew it. That's why he slipped away and went to see Jesus during the night.

Jesus told him it was all about what he needed to do to have a new life by being born with the Spirit of God.

It is vital that we turn our attention away from the flesh and pay attention to the Spirit of God in our lives.

During this season of Advent, are you giving your children or teens every opportunity to experience the presence of God in their lives?

If you are a child or a teenager, remember, Jesus was once one too, and even at age 12, Jesus was processing who he was and what God's will was for his life, and so can you.

If you are an adult, this journey with God is an ongoing journey.

If you've resisted the new birth that you need through God's Spirit, today could be your Bethlehem.

Today could be the day that you decide to begin a relationship with God or deepen that relationship significantly.

© Copyright 2018 John Michael Helms