

Pastor's Corner – Corner – 12-22-2018 Looking Sideways

I find it entertaining to try and look at commonly accepted facts or beliefs from a new (and sometimes radical) perspective. In my own mind I think of this as looking at the subject sideways. This sideways view can often give you new insights or help you to see things from someone else's perspective. I think this has helped me be less judgmental and more understanding, both good things.

One of my favorite examples of sideways looking comes from the traditional Christmas story. You all know it. It's the one that all our western Christmas plays are based on. The one where Jesus is born in a barn because there was no room in the inn. If we were to look at this story a bit sideways, we would realize that this particular rendition is vaguely (or not so vaguely) anti-Semitic. Bear with me for just a minute.

In the traditional telling we find the young couple forced to travel while Mary is 9 months pregnant. Every culture in the world gives special treatment to pregnant women. But for some reason the Jews of Bethlehem are unmoved by Mary's condition. They could care less that she's about to give birth. Nobody volunteers to make room for her. Doesn't this unlikely/unbelievable reaction imply that the people of Bethlehem are uncommonly insensitive or down right evil? Who would turn away a pregnant woman on the verge of giving birth? It's heartless. That's the anti-Semitism in the story.

Another point is that Bethlehem, Joseph's hometown, wasn't a sprawling metropolis. It was a village with something like 300-500 residents. Everyone would have known Joseph and Joseph's family. Shoot, most of the village probably *was* his family. And speaking of his family, Joseph was a direct descendent of King David and that's kind of a big deal. But never mind all that, let's stuff Joseph and Mary in a barn. Who would do that? I mean really? Would any of you refuse lodging if your second-cousin and his very pregnant wife showed up on your doorstep out of the blue? Even if you didn't know the guy very well, you'd open up for them. You'd probably even let them have your room and *you* would volunteer to sleep in the barn. But not the evil Jews of Bethlehem. Oh no. More anti-Semitism.

The traditional story of Jesus' birth is pretty unflattering towards the people of Bethlehem. But the real question is whether the traditional story is true and accurate. If this is how things actually happened, well, so be it. But by looking at the story sideways and seeing the anti-Semitism we might be prompted to dig a little deeper. And when we look a little closer, we find some very interesting details that reveal a completely different story.

The account of Jesus being placed in manger because there was no room in the inn is only found in the gospel of Luke. The other gospels don't mention this particular detail. In fact, Matthew (the only other gospel which records Jesus' birth) focuses on the visit of the wise men and he records that these guys visited Jesus in a home – not a barn (Mt 2:11). Basically this entire barn theory comes from Luke's account. So what did Luke actually say?

The traditional story hinges on the assumption that Mary and Joseph tried to find lodging in a commercial inn but couldn't because it was all filled up. We then assume that because Jesus was laid in a manger (basically a feeding trough for animals) that they must have been given the option of staying in a barn. Here's where we have to get into the words being used in the original text.

The word translated "inn" actually has a different meaning in Greek than what we typically assume. The word is *kataluma* and Luke uses this word elsewhere in his gospel. In fact, it's the same word that is used to describe the upper room where Jesus celebrated the last supper. Jesus didn't celebrate the last supper in a barn, but rather in the guest room of a private residence. In fact, that's what *kataluma* most often refers to – a guest room.

Another point is that Luke uses a totally different Greek word in the parable of the Good Samaritan when referring to a commercial inn. In that story the Samaritan takes the wounded man to the inn and pays for his room and board. The word translated "inn" in this story is *pandoxieon*. This is the word that refers to a commercial inn.

What does all this mean? In Greek, *kataluma* refers to a guest room in a private residence. *pandoxieon* refers to a commercial inn. The Bible says that Jesus was laid in a manger because there was no room in the *kataluma*. That is, Jesus was laid in the manger because the guest room in the private dwelling where they were staying was full.

Next, we can take a look at Middle Eastern culture to fully put the story in its proper context. In those days, homes were very simple affairs. One or two rooms were the norm for an entire house. If a family had a two room home there would be the main living area and then the *kataluma* (the guest room). In the main family room you would also have a separate section for the animals. Folks (especially those living in town) didn't have barns. Instead they would bring their one or two animals inside their own home at night to keep them safe. It's true that Jesus was laid in a manger but where we mess up is in assuming that the animals were kept in an outside barn like they are today. The reality is that the manger was commonly found in the main living area of a peasant home. It was there to feed the animals when the family brought them in for the night.

The Christmas story, as it likely actually happened, is something like this. Joseph and Mary arrive in Bethlehem, Joseph's home town. They stay in the home of someone they knew, probably family. But because of the census there were many other travelers coming to Bethlehem. Normally, everyone would stay in that guest room together but in this case, Mary was pregnant and about to give birth. The family, rather than keep the couple in the crowded guest room, brought Mary and Joseph into the main living area. Rather than turning them away and forcing her to give birth in a barn, the true story of Jesus' birth actually shows that Mary is treated with the respect that a pregnant woman deserves.

Rather than being anti-Semitic, the true story of Jesus' birth is one of common human decency and compassion. Jesus was born in humble, but appropriate surroundings. The Jews of Bethlehem weren't monsters, turning away the messiah. They were simple people living in a small village and they did the best they could to provide privacy for the new mother and her baby.

For me, this is the benefit of looking at something sideways: When we question our assumptions and try to gain a new perspective on something, we often find ourselves closer to the truth.

I don't know when the traditional story came into being, but I know that anti-Semitism is very, very old. As the Christian church was being born, hatred towards the Jews was at an all-time high in the Roman empire. Those early Christians did everything they could to separate themselves from the Jews. It's not too far of a stretch to think that this anti-Semitism wormed its way into the story of Jesus' birth. It's been there so long, that we don't even think about it anymore. But when you look at it sideways, it becomes pretty obvious.

I'm not suggesting that all sideways views on Biblical topics are worthy or valuable. I also believe that every theory must be substantiated by a close examination of the text. But I also believe that looking at these stories a bit sideways can spur us to dig deeper and occasionally this leads us to greater truth. In the end, a better understanding of the truth is a good thing.

Merry Christmas!
Pastor Tyler