

O Holy Night – Advent part 2

1. One of the fun things about Christmas songs is that, no matter how many times you hear them, most of us can only slog our way through the first verse. When the second verse is being sung, it falls apart and the singalong is over. This is nowhere more true than on the song “O Holy Night.” The second verse is, in fact, almost never sung.
2. Why? I think that the beauty of the first and third verses is obvious to all, but the second verse has complicated and unusual phrasing. It reminds me somewhat of the medieval carol “Lulay, Lulay” which is often called “The Coventry Carol.” It starts in Am and resolves at the end of each verse in A which sounds rather jarring. The rules in the 1500s aren’t the same as they are today.
3. While the second verse of O Holy Night is hard to sing, it has riches there if we are willing to mine them. [ONE]
4. We, today, still stand by the cradle by the light of faith. I believe that there is sufficient evidence to believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. We have gone over that evidence in my 5yrs here in both sermons and classes. But let’s not fool ourselves: any story we choose, we choose by faith.
5. We were not there at the beginning of all things. Some scientists have a story they have chosen to believe even though they were not there. Many other scientists choose other stories. Some faiths choose this or that story – or even combine stories and make a new one. We choose this one. We believe the evidence and substance of history is plain: Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea as the prophets foretold. He lived and died and rose again as many, many witnesses attested – even when their statements led directly to their deaths.
6. As the old song says: This is our story, this is our song.
7. I want you to imagine yourself standing by this manger. It was not a cradle in the sense that we use that word; it was a place where a baby could be swaddled securely. And the shadow of a cross fell over

the cradle. Mary knows that. The song “Mary Did You Know?” is sometimes attacked by people who say “Of course she knew! Haven’t you read Luke?” but they are being silly. Knowing something intellectually and knowing that something is going to be a trial doesn’t mean you really know what being in that trial is like. Show some kindness to Mary and to this sacred story.

8. And let’s go over another myth that often derails us as we just want to love our story: the innkeeper was not being mean to them and Jesus and his parents were not refugees. I hear the same nonsense every year: Jesus was homeless, he was a refugee, he was poor... Okay, they WERE poor. When they offered the sacrifice for his birth (a offering made to formally thank God for the birth of a son), they gave the least expensive option; something reserved for the poorest people.
9. They would have been in an annex to the house. Until the mid 1800s even throughout Europe, barns were attached to the home. The heat from the animals helped all of them survive. If you read US history, you will find that a warm, safe place in the barn was offered to strangers as a kindness all the way through the 1940s (Grapes of Wrath, depression).
10. They have come to this hamlet, this small village, because it is their ancestral hometown and the emperor of Rome has decreed that every family has to return to their hometown to pay their taxes. They are away from home, very low on funds, and Mary gives birth. I love nativity scenes and stories about this event but we have to realize the reality was much earthier, much more painful, much more frightening than anything we can dream up...and no one wants that on their lawn.
11. [TWO] The next chapter of Matthew picks up the story somewhat later. Matthew 2:1-2,9-14. [THREE] Here is where some will Jesus became a refugee but they are not being accurate. There was a Jewish community in Egypt since the time of Jeremiah or even earlier. And, by this time, Joseph and Mary were not poor. The gifts they were given had elevated their status considerably as seen by the way they could offer more expensive sacrifices later.

12. Still, these were dark and troubling times for the small family. This was a new story to them.
13. I've had people bring me books, DVDs, and articles on the star over Bethlehem for the last 20 years. All were convinced that they had found a scientific, historic reason for the star that would convince the atheists that the Bible was true. We need to quit doing that. Atheists won't be impressed and the star is not the point of the story.
14. The wise men came from Iraq and Iran. The people there had had many points of contact with the Jews both as their guests and as their prisoners. They also studied astronomy and astrology. They expected a King to be born and so they left on a trip that took them at least a year and up to 3 years to make. When they arrived, Jesus was in a house.
15. The point of the visit is to show that other people knew that Jesus was coming. Druids and Celts as well as other people groups in the Middle East spoke of this. Jesus would cryptically say [FOUR]. I love this passage and am content with the mystery. I invite you to be content as well.
16. The song goes on to rejoice in the fact that Jesus knows our weaknesses and has personal experience in them. This is huge. [FIVE] Because he approached us, we can approach him. Had he not approached us, we would never have had access to God. Never. Can you imagine such a tragedy?
17. Don't try too hard to imagine it. Because it didn't happen. Jesus happened. And everything changed.

The last lines of this verse repeat "Behold your King! Before him lowly bend"

As the phrase in Silent Night reminds us: Jesus, Lord at thy birth. Our savior and our lord came to us that holy night.

