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Project Zion Podcast

Josh Mangelson 00:17

Welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. This podcast explores the unique spiritual and theological gifts Community of Christ offers for today's world.

Carla Long 00:33

Hello, and welcome to the Project Zion Podcast. I'm your host Carla Long and today you're listening to Percolating on Faith with Charmaine and Tony Chvala-Smith. Hi, Charmaine. Hi, Tony.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 00:43

Hi, Carla. Good to be with you.

Tony Chvala-Smith 00:46

Hi, Carla.

Carla Long 00:46

As always, it's wonderful to be with you both. And, uh, today, gentle listener, you are listening to a podcast about Christmas. And about, you know, what the Gospels have to say about Christmas. So, I'm super excited about learning more about Christmas and what the Bible says about Christmas and what some people have just made up. There's a lot of that out there too, right? Like, people just made up a lot of stuff and said, This is Christmas.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:15

Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, anything good, good draws a lot of imagination to it. So, usually honestly.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:25

Carla, you, you will not find elves in the Bible. I can tell you that.

Carla Long 01:28

Oh, but surely Santa Claus is there. Of course.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:33

Uh, maybe not.

Carla Long 01:34

Maybe not. So, yeah, there's so many things that, like, get thrown into, like, this Christmas mishmash of stuff. And, so, we're just gonna' go straight to the Gospels, get back there, see what they have to say

about it, and what they don't have to say about it. So, I'm just gonna', like, toss it over to you two and I'm gonna' let you two get started on that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 01:54

Oh, jump in with any questions or clarifications as we go.

Tony Chvala-Smith 01:57

This is kind of like the Christmas ham toss, isn't it?

Carla Long 02:01

Oh, I don't even know what that is, but I love Christmas and I love ham and I'm totally into it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:05

He just made it up. (I decided)

Carla Long 02:08

Well, I'll play next time I'm in town.

Tony Chvala-Smith 02:10

On Christmas, we make stuff up all the time. So, there you go.

Carla Long 02:12

That's true. The Christmas ham toss.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 02:16

All right. So, using your imagination, imagine that you walked into a friend's house the week before Christmas and as you're looking around at their decorations and stuff, maybe at their Christmas tree or their creche, something just seems a little off for you and, and it seems just a little bit strange; something about their Christmas decorations. They have a really nice tree, but there isn't a star on top. There's just a whole bunch of angels kind of floating around on top of the, the tree. And, and there's a nativity scene, a creche, but there's no wisemen and there's no star on top there either. There's sheep and a lot of shepherds. And there is Jesus as expected in a manger. This is just a bit disquieting for you. You compliment them on their direct, on their decorations and they say, Oh, well, you should see what our neighbors have done. And so you do and you go next door. The neighbors have a Christmas tree, too. And there is a star on top. And there appears to be a lot of wisemen, but no shepherds. There's a few angels, but they aren't very prominent. Um, there is a figurine on the tree that's quite disturbing. It's a crazed looking man with a butcher knife. Um, Herod. Uh, there are some Stars of David on the tree and there's three number 14 on the tree. Three ornaments saying the number 14. And, uh, now, instead of a regular creche, um, there, this family has a, a traditional Colombian (. . .) and a (. . .), um, typically, I saw these when I was in Colombia, is a, usually pile of boxes or, you know, that have been, uh, kind of

planned out so that then you put a cloth over it and you make a path on it. And at the top is typically, you know, the, the birth of Jesus; that kind of thing. And, and each week in Advent, you move your characters up the path and the homes that I saw, you know, kids had toy tanks and giraffes and hippos on the path going up to the, so, but this, this (. . .), even it, it seems a little bit strange because, um, it's not that at the top, it's not a stable. It's like a regular house in Bethlehem, a, a, you know, first century. And if you looked in the windows of the house, you'd see Mary waddling around pretty pregnant and you'd see Joseph out back maybe making tables and, and chairs. Um, and there is a star overhead, though, and coming up the path a little closer each week is the, the wisemen. So, so those are some things you kind of expected. But, again, there's no shepherds, there's no sheep. There is a donkey in the stable next to the house packed and ready to go. And you see the sign that says to Egypt, uh, up at the top by the house. Um, so, one of the things you, you start to realize is that each house, each of these houses that you've just visited, is using only one of the Gospels in their decorations for Christmas. And my question is, can you tell which Gospel each house is using? So, Carla, any guesses here?

Carla Long 06:11

Oh, gosh, I have 1000s of guesses. But, um, I really wish this were like a talk show so we could have people call in and make their guesses. That would be by far the best. (There you go.) So, you better just tell us, but I, I have them in my head.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 06:27

So, the first one is with angels and so that one would be Luke. The one with wisemen is Matthew. And, so, and in Matthew, um, Mary and Joseph live in Bethlehem. And, so, that's, there, they have the baby at home. There's no manger. There's no stable. There's, you know, and then, and then fleeing to Egypt. Um, in Luke is the whole story of coming from Nazareth down to Bethlehem for the census and having no place in the inn. So, so you've got those two stories. So, it's kind of fun to separate out these, these two stories and say, What would, what would you find if you use just one? What would Christmas look like? If you use just one of the two gospels that have nativities or stories?

Carla Long 07:25

Speaking, yeah, like we just mishmash them so much like, you know, in lots of nativity sets, if not all nativity sets, there's the wisemen that are there. And, you know, like, if they're in a stable, should the wisemen be there? Probably not?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 07:39

Because they come quite a bit later. So, yeah, exactly. So, lots of things, lots of details that aren't very, um, accurate, but are illustrative. They, they help us to imagine the parts of the story. And then, you know, we've talked, we're talking a little bit about Luke and Matthew here. And I think that's another piece that is always really helpful to, to realize is that of the four Gospels, only two have a story of Jesus' birth. And both John and Mark don't have anything. It, for them, this was not an important part of the story.

Tony Chvala-Smith 08:17

So, if you were doing the nativity from John or Mark, basically the lights are off at Christmas time. There's, there's, there's nothing going on there. So, so, it's either Matthew or Luke.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 08:27

So, those are the two that we'll be looking at, we'll take a closer look at each of these stories of Jesus' birth, these nativities, and, uh, see what they can tell us and especially if we can look at them separately. And maybe get the idea, uh, internalize a little bit the idea that each of these gospels wants to tell us some different things about who Jesus is, what's happening, what God is doing, what it means for the future, uh, what it means for those who will, a few decades later, be Christians and be, see themselves as followers of Jesus. So, that's where we're gonna go next. (Yeah.) We're gonna walk you through the two nativities, the one in Matthew first and then the one in Luke.

Tony Chvala-Smith 09:14

And this is really important because our New Testament canon gave us four different portraits of Jesus and we're so used to jumbling them together. But really, these portraits were written independently of each other, though Matthew and Luke both had some kind of copy of Mark in front of them, but they each tell their own story. And they were written as pieces of literature meant to be taken as a whole and read as a whole. So, so while the jumbling together is understandable and not bad, it's really good to, to read Matthew as Matthew, uh, and not just blend it with other stuff. Or read Luke as Luke. So, so, yeah, so we'll start with Matthew.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 09:51

So, we'll walk you through and first we want to say that two thirds of the first chapter in Matthew, and it really, only the first and second chapter have anything to do with Jesus' birth and, and that, so, it's a pretty short, in Matthew two chapters and two thirds of the first one is genealogy which everyone loves to read and they just, you know, they just hover over those names to find the meaning and. Actually, everybody skips it and goes on to verse 18, or 17. And, um, but it's really, really important in Matthew's Gospel what that first two thirds of that first chapter is about. Um, it's important, first of all, because it's tying Jesus closely to Israel's journey with God. Jesus is part of the continuing journey with God that Israelites, uh, Judeans, uh, Jews have had. So, Matthew is going to keep hitting that theme over and over again.

Tony Chvala-Smith 10:53

And one of the things we know about Matthew's Gospel is that of the four, its intended audience is most clearly, uh, Jewish Christians, people whose background is in Judaism. So, that's one of the reasons Matthew tells the story in this way. He focuses on things that people of Jewish background would have immediately keyed into, like this genealogy at the start that's divided into three sections of 14 generations each.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 11:18

Yeah, so the, this genealogy emphasizes Abraham. So, the, the one who made this covenant with God, and then David, who made a covenant with God, and then Jesus' connection to them. And, so, that's really, really important. And the, Tony was talking about the generations, you know, there's 14 generations here, and then there's 14 generations here, and there's 14 generations; 14 being, um, the numeric equivalent for David. So, it's this connection back to David who was the great king and the, and in, um, in ancient Israel, the, the king was the, the Anointed One, the, the Messiah and, so, connecting Jesus as Messiah to David. Um, so, it's just fascinating. And also in this genealogy, there are, before Mary is even mentioned, there are four women. And that's really pretty unusual in a genealogy to mention the women, the, the mothers, the wives. And, so, um, these four women, um, let's see, Tamar and, Hagar, um, no, and Rahab, and Ruth (and Bathsheba) and Bathsheba. (Uh huh.) Uh, all have, um, well, they have interesting backgrounds and there's some kind of sexual nuance or, or activity happening (Or scandal . . .) or scandal, that's a good word. And, and each of them find themselves in a dire situation not of their own making. And they take charge of their lives and their futures, um, even when what they do might seem scandalous to others. So, it's four women who are pretty, um, looked badly upon and, or at least questionably.

Tony Chvala-Smith 13:29

A, and, uh, Tamar and Ruth and Rahab are not Israelites, right? So, they're outsiders. And that's really important for, (Uh huh.) for, for the author of Matthew, who's writing to Christians, primarily of Jewish background be able to say, Hey, there's room for Gentiles, there's room for outsiders, uh, because Jesus has some in his family tree.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 13:53

Ruth (Yeah.) and Bathsheba. Yes. So, going on with the storyline. So, then it, Mary is mentioned who, hmm, was pregnant. You know, she's engaged to Joseph, they, there, they haven't had sex yet. It doesn't say it exactly that way. But that is definitely what's being said. And she's, the quote is, found to be pregnant by the Holy Spirit. So, this is a big tension point because Jos, Joseph decides he's going to divorce her quietly because he doesn't want to embarrass her. But in the, and in Matthew, the angels are going to come to, to Joseph pretty often. So, to, to put him on the right path, uh, to, to help him see things in a different way. So, an angel comes to him in a dream, and says to not be afraid of marrying Mary and to name her son Jesus because Jesus meaning he will save his people from their sins. So, that's the name, the meaning of the name of, of Jesus (In Hebrew.) in Hebrew. And then Jesus is born at home in Bethlehem, as we mentioned, and there's not really many details. It's basically, And Jesus was born. And then after he was born, so there's, there's, yeah, there's not a lot of details there. And then when we go into chapter two, we have the Magi following the star coming from the east. And first they go to Jerusalem because the star means that there's been a, a king born.

Tony Chvala-Smith 15:36

Plus there are lots of restaurants there, too. They've been, they've been traveling for, for years, almost years.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 15:43

So, they go to Jerus, Jerusalem because at least they, they'll be able to ask for directions there. And they, um, ask Herod, Well, so where is this new king? And Herod went, New king? What, what new king? Yeah, when you find him, you let him, let me know, okay? And, and so they look up the, the predictions about where a Messiah might be born and they decide on Bethlehem. And so, the wisemen go on to Bethlehem where they find, um, where they find Mary and, and, um, Jesus. They're actually, uh, when they arrive, there's no mention of Joseph, uh, being there. So, I don't know if they were there for a few hours or for a few days. But, uh, when they first arrive, it just talks about the child and Mary. They pay, pay homage or they worship Jesus. They leave some pretty classy gifts. And they, because they're warned to not do so, they, they don't go back and visit Herod on their way back and don't tell him where they found the child.

Tony Chvala-Smith 16:51

And side note on Magi, the Greek word Magoi, or Magos, from which we get magician, but in the first century, the, the Magoi were basically Persian astrologers. So, so these people, and by the way, there's not three, there's a bunch of them, and there's no number given, it's just that they're three gifts, right? That's how the three came in. But, but these are think of them as Persian, Persian astrologers who have come a long way because they saw something in the sky that, that gave them pause. And, uh, they are the first people in the whole story of Jesus in Matthew who, you can translate the Greek verb, worship him. So, non-, non-Jewish people, Gentiles, outsiders, uh, pay homage or you can translate the Greek verb (. . .) as kneel down as if in worship. So, that's, that's a pretty cool other thing that Matthew is trying to tell his, his mostly Jewish Christian readers.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 17:45

Cool. So, after the Magi have gone, Joseph has another dream and an angel tells him to take his family and flee to Egypt, uh, because Herod wants to find the child and kill it. And, so, they do. And Herod, uh, then has his soldiers come into the Bethlehem area and kill every male child who's two years or younger. And, um, then there's a, a lament there, um, that takes some things from the Old Testament about the, the death of the children. So, Joseph and Mary and Jesus stay in Egypt until the nasty Herod, that we have on the tree with the butcher knife, dies and they come back, but, um, the relative of Herod who's taken over is almost as bad. And, so, instead of going back home, where family and home and all, a house would have been, they go to Nazareth, and that becomes their, their new home area. So, that's, that's something we don't often hear because we're all used to them coming to Bethlehem (Uh huh.) just for the census and then going back from the Luke story, but in Matthew, that Bethlehem was home, and now as they return from Egypt, they're going to have to go someplace else where they're going to be the outsiders. Uh, they'll go to Galilee and there's some pretty good sized Jewish communities there that they, they will go to Nazareth being one of them. Um,

Tony Chvala-Smith 19:26

And cool, cool side point here, twice, twice, then, in Matthew's nativity, uh, Mary, Joseph and Jesus have to abandon home and seek refuge somewhere else. So, that's, that's a, I think that's a really interesting theme, uh, in the Gospel of Matthew. Um, and I dare, I dare you, Carla, to hang a Herod on your Christmas tree. I think I could do that, but

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 19:55

Put it somewhere that the kids can't see it.

Carla Long 19:57

(. . .) story for my two- and my four-year old when they're a little bit older.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:02

Yes, I'm thinking that's a good idea. So, when we look at these stories, one of the things to think about is what is the human, um, experience? So, what are these tension points in the story in Matthew's Gospel? Well, it's starting at the beginning. Will Mary be publicly ridiculed for being pregnant before marriage? Um, will Joseph divorce her? You know, these questions that lots of people can identify with. These, uh, you know, public shaming. Um, and then who are these strangers from the East who seem to know more about Jesus than his own parents?

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:42

And how will we feed all these strangers?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 20:44

They brought inedible gifts.

Tony Chvala-Smith 20:49

Gold, frankincense, and myrrh. But they did not bring pita.

Carla Long 20:55

So that actually reminds me of, you know, like, I've seen memes about Mary, and, you know, the little drummer boy, and she's like, Yeah, kid, I just had a baby. What I really need is for you to play your snare drum at me. Thank you. You know, things like that.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 21:07

Yeah, exactly. Let's look at this as a human experience. Uh, so another human experience is fear. Herod's fear and his fear that this child king will replace him and, and will be a threat to his reign. And, so, he does what people in power or who long for more power, do--they attack. Um, and they, they use their power to wipe out their, um, competition. Again, angels instructing Joseph and Mary and the baby

to flee before Herod tries to kill them. So, another tension point. Um, and then that, that kind of sense of the mindless killing of all these children for the sake of one person's ego. Um, and then the returning from Egypt, not to their home. Um, and that sense of danger, that it's still dangerous for them. Um, so, there's all of these tensions that are going on in the plotline that I think really can help us get a lot more out of the story, um, because then Christmas is not just this wonderful time where we get the presents we want. And isn't it nice that the angels are singing or, you know, that the, the wisemen have arrived, but there's a lot of human drama and suffering in there as well.

Tony Chvala-Smith 22:33

So, if, if you look at the Matthew story in terms of themes, there's a lot of them that are quite important. For example, this, Matthew tells this story in a way where it has deep roots in the Hebrew Scriptures, and in the, in the whole story of Judaism. So, Matthew loves to quote the Old Testament. He quotes it in Greek. He quotes the Septuagint. Uh, and, or sometimes he implicitly refers to it, and, oh, gosh, the one scholar has estimated that Matthew has over 60 explicit quotations from the, from the Jewish Scriptures. But then if you ask about allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures, there's 140, 150. And there's a lot of allusions, so, he's trying to show this, the connection between Jesus and the long story that we have in the Hebrew Bible. Um, another theme is that, that Jesus, Matthew wants to show that Jesus is the apex of the Abraham and David stories. And that's pretty important because as you read on the gospel, you see that Jesus is a different kind of, a different kind of son of David than the original David, uh, in terms of his, his message of, of peace and love and reconciliation. Um, none of this in the story is expected or easy or comfortable, uh, especially for Mary. But for, but for Joseph, and I guess even for Herod for all the wrong reasons, nothing is, nothing is comfortable here. And it's not comfortable for the wisemen, for, for Magi, a bunch of them traveling in a caravan for a very long time, all the way from what we would call Iran today, you know, literally hundreds and hundreds of miles. (And then them having to ask for directions.) Which is very uncomfortable for men to do sometimes, I must say. But another, another key theme here is that, that in Matthew's Gospel, this, notice that the Nativity is about a journey, right? There's a lot of journeying going on here. Um, and, so, the, the following of Jesus means leaving your comfortable spaces, your home, uh, sometimes to preserve your faith, sometimes, uh, as the, the one door that gets open. I mean, that's why they go to Egypt. That's the only safe place to go. Um, in Matthew, this journey is about preservation. But, uh, even, even in the, even in the, the, the fear and in the temporary exile, God is still with them. So, I think that's a really important thing, especially as we try to apply to, to us in our own time. Uh, so

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 24:58

And one other thing that is kind of related to that is how responsive, how trusting Joseph is of these visits from angels. And, or these angels in his dreams. Um, even though it's obviously, it was not, it seems like it was a strange thing for him, you know, how do, what do I do with this. But he was willing to trust, uh, what God was saying even if it was in such an unusual way. And that's, that's kind of a neat theme that we can all take with us is that sometimes God speaks to us in unexpected ways. And part of it

is figuring out what can we, what can we trust? And how can we respond to what it is that God might be saying to us.

Tony Chvala-Smith 25:44

And then also think, thinking more about the journey theme here, I mean, lots of us will, will enjoy being comfortably at home on Christmas, right? But in Matthew's nativity, there is no comfort at home, because they have to leave home to go to Egypt and then they can't come back home, they have to go to another place where they're, in all these places, they're outsiders; outsiders in Egypt, outsiders in, in, uh, Nazareth. Uh, they're, they're southerners who are now living in the northern province, right, where the accent is different and everything. And, so, so, uh, Christmas in the Gospel of Matthew has very little to do with comfort and everything to do about being willing to hit the road.

Carla Long 26:26

I think that's super important for people to realize. I, I, I, I think you've made a lot of excellent points. But you know, like, I don't think ever, ever in advent type of service have I, we talked about Mary, Joseph and a baby fleeing to Egypt. Like nev, we've never talked about that in a, in a Christmas setting and it is one of the two Christmas stories that we have--Matthew and Luke. And it's a really important part that gets left out quite a bit. So, I think that's super important to remind ourselves that Christmas isn't about comfort and eating, you know, um, little smokies which is what I think it is.

Tony Chvala-Smith 27:10

Well, let's, let's call them what they are in the story. They're refugees.

Carla Long 27:13

Yes, absolutely. (They're refugees. So, yes.) They probably didn't get a lot of little smoky eating, probably. And, so, I get it. So, yeah, I mean, caring for each other is very important on Christmas continue.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 27:25

And, and I think the thing that's helpful is to remember that this gospel, Gospel of Matthew is probably written between 80 and 90 CE. So, it's written to people who are Christian now, followers of Christ, and that this message would have been important that this is not a journey. This following Jesus bit means following when his, his uncomfortable journey in life and that, that we needn't expect that it should be easy or happy all the time. So, I think that was, would have been helpful to them in some difficult times.

Tony Chvala-Smith 28:06

So, Charmaine, I want to ask you, if, if we've only got Matthew (. . .) as our Gospel, what's gonna', what's our Christmas tree and our creche gonna' look like?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 28:12

Well, you'll have a big star, right? Because that's what the, the wisemen are looking for. And that's what they're following. You would also probably have, if you were looking at, thinking about the creche, or the nativity, that, um, Joseph would be in the foreground. Joseph would be the one who God is speaking to through the angels in his, in his dreams. Uh, Mary's more in the background. Um, like I said, the, the birth is barely mentioned. Um, so she's talked about, but not heard. And I think that's kind of a, a big difference that you're going to have when you, when we start looking at Luke. Um, so, here there's only the Magi. There's no shepherds. Um, but they do kind of set this, this, the bar high for what kinds of gifts you should be getting at Christmas. So, that consumerism part might. So, um, there probably weren't just three Magi, as Tony said. Uh, so you could have lots of them on your tree and you could have all kinds of, they're in fancy dress. Um, and again, maybe Herod should be mentioned in the story. So, tucked, tucked in somewhere where the little, little ones can't see him, but reminds adults of the scary parts of the story.

Tony Chvala-Smith 29:36

Herod in that sort of Here's Johnny pose.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 29:38

And you might have lots of Egyptian baby toys as ornaments on, on your, you know, camels and you know, sand dunes and who knows, Pharaohs or something on your tree. Um, the number 14 we mentioned, uh, the, the numeric, um, number for David. And, um, and an angel of the Lord that, you know, there needs to be at least four of, four sightings of the angel of the Lord on your tree, I think. Um, the one that said, Don't divorce Mary. Um, Flee to Egypt as a second one. A third one, Return to, to Israel. And the fourth one, Go on to Galilee instead of Bethlehem. And then if you were to have figurines on there, you'd have Abraham, and maybe Tamar and Ruth and Rahab and Bathsheba, David, Mary and Joseph. So, you've got a nice selection of, of, uh, folks that you can have on the tree.

Tony Chvala-Smith 30:40

And then, Carla, your kids could say, Mom, who's, who's Rahab?

Carla Long 30:46

It'll be like, I'll be happy to tell you that story in two or three years. That would be the weirdest tree ever.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 30:54

And you need to have a donkey on there as well. (Yeah.) So,

Carla Long 30:58

I do have a question, though. I, I might feel, I might end up looking kind of dumb after asking this, but aren't there names for the wiseman and where did those names come from?

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:07

Those names come from Christian tradition. Uh, (I figured.) I, I have, I think one of them is named Melchior, Baltasar, and Ralph I think is the other one. I can't remember the third one.

Carla Long 31:18

I think it's Jim. I think it's Jim Bob.

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:21

Yes, they, they, they have received names in Christian tradition. Uh, fourth, fifth, sixth century, somewhere in there. So,

Carla Long 31:27

Got it. I was just curious. I didn't think that they were, they came from the Matthew story. But I was all of a sudden I was like, Oh, no. Did they? Glad to know they didn't.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:36

You were correct. All right.

Tony Chvala-Smith 31:39

So, Luke, let's go on to Luke.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 31:40

The, the very first Christmas present. So, we're gonna' go on to Luke's nativity. Very, very different, both in tone and in characters who takes the front, front of the stage. So, whole new, different, and we start in a whole different place, too. We start with a story of Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are childless, and Zechariah is a priest in the temple. And one day he's in there offering the incense in the inner part of the temple and here we get a name for the angel, Angel Gabriel, uh, shows up. A, and these angels must get really tired of this because they always have to start out with, Don't be afraid. Because you would be, right? So, Zechariah is told, you know, your, your wife will have a son and, and Zechariah who's old, real old, um, laughs at that. And, so, Gabriel also says, Name him, name your son, John. And, um, he will turn many to God and make ready a people prepared for the Lord. So, but because he's laughing, and doesn't believe that, you know, he could father a son, he's struck mute and, um, which is, you know, perhaps a, a real blessing to Elizabeth. The first gift of Christmas. So, pretty quickly, Elizabeth conceives. Um, is, Zechariah is still mute. I think he's, um, and, and then Gabriel is sent to visit Mary who lives in Nazareth. So, in this story, um, Joseph and Mary start out in Nazareth. Nazareth is their hometown. Um, she's engaged to Joseph who's of the house of David. And that gets mentioned a few times in Luke, that Joseph is of the house of David. Uh, therefore, the, the idea that Jesus is influenced by that. And, um, again, Gabriel says, Don't be afraid. Uh, you'll bear a son and you'll name him Jesus and He will be great--the Son of God. And Mary's kind of like, But I'm a virgin. And, you know, the whole story is, Yes, but, you know, giving her a choice. And she says yes. Mary says yes. And Mary then goes to visit Elizabeth and breaks into song. There's a lot of singing in Luke's Gospel. That's kind

of a fun way to think about it. So, Mary goes to visit Elizabeth. She breaks into song. Um, then there's the birth of John, which is, is, uh, Zechariah and Elizabeth's son, and Zechariah finally can speak and he breaks into song. And there's a nice little segment there of his song. And then, finally, we get to chapter two and here's the birth of Jesus, um, again, under un, um, unexpected circumstances, um, unsanitary situations. Then Mary and Joseph go to, um, go from Nazareth to Bethlehem for the Imperial census and probably spent too much time on the donkey, or whatever they rode, or walking, and she goes into labor and she gives birth and there's no room in the inn for them and, so, they're in the stable and. It doesn't really say they're in the stable, but it says that Jesus had to be put in the manger, so, kind of, you assume that it's a stable that has a manger in it, uh, because there was no room in the inn. And then the shepherds are visited by angels, a whole bunch of angels. And they're told to go check out the baby Messiah down the road. And, um, then the heavenly hosts break into song, the shepherds find the child and Mary and Joseph. And, again, it's, they're telling Mary and Joseph what they learned from the angels. So, there's these folks who are not the highest class folks in the world who are smelly and coming from watching the shep, the sheep, and coming and telling Mary and Joseph what the angels told them about this baby. Um, and then, at, Jesus is circumcised on the eighth day, presented in the temple where Simeon blesses them and the prophetess Anna praises God for this child who will bring redemption. So, a whole different sense of what he's about. And then the family returns home to Nazareth. And this is the only gospel that has an adolescent story about Jesus. And this is Jesus, who kind of forgets to go with his family back to Nazareth after the Passover and, and they come back and find Him in the temple talking with the, the scholars and things. And he's, he's got a little sassy mouth on him there from, like a 12- year- old might, Well, you should have expected me to be in my Father's house, kind of thing. And

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:29

I wonder if you could translate his response to his mother, Whatever.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 37:36

Maybe, um, but anyhow, so, this is the one, the only scene that we have in the canonical gospels of Jesus, somewhere between being a young child and being a grown person who is starting his ministry, is this one little, little scenario, uh, when he's about 12.

Tony Chvala-Smith 37:59

So, that's the, that's the narrative in Luke. It's very different, um, if you look at, like, themes that appear in Luke and Luke's nativity. So, this story centers on the role of women. So, in, in Luke one and two, women are in the foreground. (Um hmm.) And the men are somewhat, uh, Homer Simpson-like in the background.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 38:19

Or unnecessary.

Tony Chvala-Smith 38:23

So, uh, the, the focus is key with them. And this is true in the, in Luke's whole gospel. Luke constantly comes back to the important role of women in, in the story of Jesus because Jesus turns upside down the status quo, including socially constructed roles. So, women are the heroes in Luke's, uh, in Luke's telling of the story of Jesus, the poor are the heroes, Samaritans are his heroes, outsiders like the shepherds, and, ultimately, the Gentiles. These, so, so Luke's got this focus on it's the outsiders who are being brought in here. So, another theme here is that, that God's action is, is, uh, for those who don't usually get anything or who are left out. So, what God is doing is perceived and celebrated in this gospel by the low, not the mighty. And, so, that's Mary's song, the, with the, the Magnificat, My soul magnifies the Lord. He's looked, he's looked with favor on the, the low, the lowliness, uh, on my lowliness. And, so, uh, oh, well, by the way, like in Matthew, there's a lot of do, do not be afraid here, um, because there's plenty of things to be afraid about. And a, and again, there's also the theme of travel. Uh, that's the, you know, Mary going to Elizabeth and then there's, there's, uh, there's the journey from Nazareth down to Bethlehem. Um, but the, the, the first readers this gospel would have known for sure that Mary and Joseph going from Beth, from Nazareth down to Bethlehem, that's the, this is, their vulnerable, right? There's a lot of vulnerability in travel in the ancient world, even in the Roman Empire. So, the, there's the extra vulnerability of Mary tra, having to travel when, I guess we'd say, she's clo, getting close to her due date. Right. So, um, vulnerability about what this will, will cost, too, like, they're going to be going to a census to help raise Imperial taxes. And, so, is this going to cost them extra stuff, too. Um, it's a journey in which wondrous things happen when you leave home, uh, or God meet you on the way, but, but also note, uh, from Luke two and, and the, the family trip to Jerusalem. This was, this was a yearly thing. Right. So, later on, we discover that Mary and Joseph made the trip to Jerusalem annually and that's connected to the story of Jesus, the adole, adolescent. And, finally, interesting to note about the, it's often called the virgin birth, but probably more accurately called virginal conception stories in both Matthew and Luke. Um, this, this one is a mild one compared to what you might find other Greco-Roman mythologies and, and, and religions, where in lots of those stories, the, a, a god actually (. . .) my God actually comes down and is depicted as impregnating a woman. Um, there's, the, that's not what's, that's not how the story is described. Um, it's, it's, it, for a Greco-Roman audience reading Luke's Gospel, this was not unbelievable or bizarre, but it's certainly described differently from how you might have found it in, in the, the myths in Greco-Roman religions. It's, it's much more historicized. And much more, I guess, I'd say it's much more believable in the sense that there's no, there's no, uh, uh, divine taking on a human form and coming down and having sex with Mary. It's not, it's not described like that at all.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 41:46

So, I think that's kind of interesting because, um, you know, kids usually take in the Christmas story, you know, just as, Oh, that's the way it is. But as people get older and they go, That is a really kind of strange story about how, about how Mary got pregnant. And, and, so, I mean, for modern people, for people in our time, uh, it's, that makes it unbelievable, in lots of ways. Uh, but to, to know that in its own time, it was not unbelievable. And in, and some of the differences that would have been with the Greco-

Roman approaches to gods and demigods would have been noteworthy, uh, because they're saying something else about who this God is. So, I, I think that's kind of a just an interesting place to go, especially if you have some, uh, if people have some discomforts with these descriptions that seem like, Really, you know, this is not something that we are familiar with or expect is far as, um, how Jesus got here.

Tony Chvala-Smith 42:54

And it's, it's, I think it's helpful just to sit in wonder with the story, right, rather than to try to say, Oh, this couldn't be blah, blah, blah. That's, that's us overlaying our own worldview on the story. But look, Matthew and Luke are independent of each other. And they both have, they both have a tradition about a, a very curious event related to, (Um huh.) to the conception of Jesus. So, so, hey, let, let them, let them say what they want to say and, uh, bracket your own stuff for a while. (Right.) That's my, my approach to it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 43:20

Take it in context of the time and understandings, but. So, we kind of switched these around this time. We, we did, uh, tension points and then themes on Matthew and we're kind of doing the reverse here. But, um, so, what are some of the tension points in this story? (. . .) the, these are the, the human aspects of it. So, thinking of Zechariah going to work and having an angel surprise you there. Um, that's kind of a new and unusual thing. And then Mary and Elizabeth unlooked for events in their lives. And then meeting and having that kind of support of each other in the unexpectedness of their expect, of their expectancy, um, that they have someone who can understand something of what they're going through and that God is involved in some way. Um, that, that the, who they are, is going to be seen in a new way. So, there's a lot of, kind of, the di, divine interruption in their lives and what that will mean and maybe what that will require of them because Elizabeth's old, too, and they're gonna' be raising a, a child. Um, and another of those tension points that in the midst of Roman occupation and that deep resentment that people have towards, towards the Roman soldiers that you would see every day, what is all this talk of peace on earth, you know? Um, and that's a theme that comes through in Luke and this baby has something to do with, uh, the beginning of a new kind of peace on Earth. Um, another tension point is that God is acting in and for the lowly. So, here's this pregnant young woman, um, and it's the powerful, uh, who are not going to want to hear that, that God is working in the lowly, the poor women, um, those who are despised. And then another tension point is, Jesus is already an independent actor at the age of 12. You know, he's, he's already getting a sense of his own identity separate from his family, which is still an adolescent thing to today.

Tony Chvala-Smith 45:44

And there's one other tension point that, uh, is worth mentioning is that the, the angels refer to, when the angels appear to the shepherds, they refer to this child as, Who's going to be the Savior. And the Greek word is sōtēr and it's the word that was used for the Emperor. Right? The emperor was considered the savior of the empire and all that. It's very political word. But here's this child born to, to poor family. Uh,

this one's the, the Savior. So, it, the, it's this, the Christmas story (Contract.) here in Luke is, yeah, the contract. It's, there's a tension because, you know, Who is, who is the real savior? And, and, uh, is it the mighty strong one who has the, all these Roman legions behind him? Or is it this little baby? Uh, it's, it's quite an interesting tension point. Plus, it's a very political part of the story. So, Charmaine, I'll ask the question, again, if we only got Luke, what's going to be on the Christmas tree and in your creche?

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 46:36

Well, you know, I've never seen this, but I think it would be really appropriate to have is to have some Elizabeth there. Elizabeth and Mary, um, you know, whether it was on the, the (. . .), you know, you could maybe have Elizabeth and Mary walking in the, the early parts of Advent up that path together. (Um hum.) Um, there would, of course, be no Magi or no wisemen, but there'd be a bunch of shepherds and lots of sheep, um, and all the smells that come with that. Uh, you'd have angels and you could even have, you know, they have the little banner that says Gabriel, so you'd know, because Gabriel is the one who came to visit both Zechariah and Mary. And then you'd also have the whole chorus that, that sang to the shepherd. So you'd, you'd want lots of angels. Um, Mary would be, uh, pretty much the act, the, the main focus in lots of ways. Joseph would be in the background. Um, you'd have music. Um, Luke's nativity is just so full of song, whether it's the angels or whether it's, it's the Magnificat or whether it's Zechariah's song. Um, people can't help themselves but, but sing it and let their hearts rise in the singing. You should have two babies, um, in this storyline, um, or, you know, maybe a young John the Baptist toddling up to, to, uh, Mary and Joseph's house, uh, to see the, the new baby. I don't know, I think that could kind of be fun. Um, and you'd have lots of diapers, although I don't know that that's exactly how they did things back then. Uh, and you'd have two old, old people who are praising God as they hold Jesus. And that would be Simeon and Anna who say, God is doing something here. You folks take a look. So, different kinds of people that you might have on your Christmas tree or in your creche. But it could be fun.

Carla Long 48:47

That sounds really awesome. I, I love the way that you have shaped both of these stories. And, and, and I really wonder every once in a while if people truly realize how completely different Matthew is from Luke and how, and that Mark and John don't mention it at all because who cares about that, right? We want you to care about Jesus as the guy who did things. We don't care about the, how Jesus got here. I, I really, I really appreciate that. And I love talking about the singing and the angels in Luke because really, you, we just mash those stories together and we just assume that they're one thing and they're really, really not. It's really cool.

Tony Chvala-Smith 49:27

Yeah, yeah. Well, like you, was, with John and John and Mark equally important canonical gospels, but we'd say, At Christmas, they played the strong silent types. So, and, and, you, you know what, let, let each Gospel be what it is, right? Yeah, if you have to preach on, on Luke, make sure it's Luke you're preaching on and not mixing Matthew in and so on. Just let each one tell its own story.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 49:53

Though, um, we'll talk about times like these major parts of the season where blending the stories together has its own beauty. But first, I think we'll go ahead and talk about what are some of the big themes that we find in both of these, these, uh, narratives about Jesus' birth and early childhood?

Tony Chvala-Smith 50:13

Yeah, and so there are, like, big theological themes. And I think the first one here would be that, in both gospels, Jesus' birth is a God thing. Right? That's one of the things both gospels are trying to say. This is a God thing. And then the constant refrain, do not be afraid, don't be afraid, don't be afraid. Um, uh, when you, when you get into the historical cultural context, these people have a lot to be afraid of. And it's like, Oh, for goodness sakes, well, so do we. So, uh, reiterating that theme of the, of the Christmas story from both gospels, don't be afraid. Another big theme, those from the underside of ancient cultures are the main actors. That's really important. Uh, those, those, these, these people are not powerful. They're not, they don't have high social standing. They have, they have z, zero social standing in the wider Roman Empire. And these are the ones through whom God is acting. So,

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 51:11

Another theme is that it is often the outsiders that get it first, you know, whether it's the wisemen or whether it's the shepherds. Um, and even out, people outside of the family, people further out, Simian, Ana, um, people who are at a distance will sometimes be able to see what those up close can't. Um,

Tony Chvala-Smith 51:36

So, uh, uh, in both, in both stories, vulnerability is a really big theme; the vulnerability of Mary, the vulnerability of Joseph, the vulnerability of the child, the vulnerability of a, a country that is overrun by an occupying, uh, empire that sees them as simply fodder, right? Um, vulnerability to God, that God is a disrupter sometimes of our, of our patterns and, and the things that we, we think ought to be just the normal way of stuff.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 52:06

Um, in, in both stories, there's a lot of travel, which is really important because it reminds us that the, the Christian life is a, is a journey, it's not a destination, right? It's, it's a long, long, long path. And there's lots of twists and turns in it. So, And that's, that would be the next one is that, that God's action, whether in individuals' lives or in the world is often disruptive and unexpected. And that we can't plan our comfortable little life and expect that God will just go along with that, but that if we're open to what God wants in is doing in the world, we can expect the unexpected and that, that we'll have to struggle at times. And then peace. Um, and here, not that peace is comfort or calmness or even stability. But that peace comes amidst the uncertainty and conflict. It's a different kind of peace. Um, and it comes from God. Um, it's not of our own making.

Tony Chvala-Smith 53:08

So, finally, I mean, we've said, we started off saying that, you know, in Advent, and we've said a couple of times, that we're, we're just used to blending the stories together. That's, that's, that's not a bad thing. It's a good thing really, it's

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 53:18

It's appropriate to do in these, in the high holiday, high, high Christian holidays, where we want to bring the different dimensions that each of these stories brings to help fill out the story and, and, uh, help us see the different dimensions, both for, for Christmas and for Easter especially. But, um, and, you know, and the people who brought together the New Testament, um, didn't say, Oh, we have to find the, the truest gospel. We can only use the truest gospel or the best writers gospel. Um, no, they brought these four different gospels together and said, Let's let them all stand because they all help us know something more about who Jesus is or what God is doing in this situation. I think it's a, a good way to, to think about, um, using these at these different times in the Christian calendar is that they bring different dimensions. They're not going to agree and I think that's just a good place to start. They were not intended to agree. Um, they are intended to tell the story in ways that help us know different parts of who Jesus is.

Tony Chvala-Smith 54:29

So, that's a, a look at the two nativity stories and, uh, to, to put it, to put it very simply in, in Greek to Karla, Karla Christiana, that's Merry Christmas in Greek or actually lovely birth of Christ is how you would say it literally in Greek, so,

Carla Long 54:43

That's beautiful. I was just gonna. say bless you. Pretty close. Uh, that is wonderful. I really appreciated this. I really appreciated our special Christmas edition of Percolating on Faith. Uh, gentle listeners, I pitched this to Tony and Charmaine, like, I don't know, like four days ago and they're like, Yes, let's do it. That's a great idea. Um, so, I'm really, thank you so much for telling us about that. And for just, you know, kind of breaking it down for us and in ways that we can appreciate and understand, like in decorating. Very easy to understand. Who doesn't understand decorating? So, thank you so much, you two. Anything else you want to say before we, uh, call it off?

Tony Chvala-Smith 55:23

Uh, I, uh, I think for a retirement plan, we need to figure out how to do the Herod cookie cutters.

Carla Long 55:30

Amen. Amen. If someone's gonna' go straight Matthew for their nativity. Yes, absolutely.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 55:35

Uh, I think one of the things about both of the gospels that have the, a narrative about Jesus' birth is that they, the, the way that they're told really allows our imaginations to join them. And if we are willing to, to look more closely at both of those storylines, I think we'll find places where our own feelings and our own vulnerabilities and our own, um, desires to follow, to travel with Jesus, um, get, get investigated a little bit where we can go a little bit deeper. So, a story, the, both of the stories, uh, give room for our imaginations and, um, exploring the human experience of trusting God in really unusual situations and scary situations.

Carla Long 56:32

Well, that is awesome. Thank you so much, you two. I really appreciate it.

Charmaine Chvala-Smith 56:36

Merry Christmas,

Carla Long 56:38

Merry Christmas.

Josh Mangelson 56:50

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