



Roanoke, Virginia

Christmas Eve

December 24, 2023

## ***“Jesus’ Birth Certificate: (Father’s Name)”***

Advent Sermon Series Part IV

*John 1:14-18*

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For the Sundays of Advent, the preaching pastor has been filling in the blanks of an imagined birth certificate for Jesus. The way we filled out the certificate is different from the way Joseph would have filled it out.

With “Place of Birth,” we would write in the same thing: “**Bethlehem.**” Joseph would have been surprised to write “Bethlehem” because he and Mary expected the baby to be born in their hometown of Nazareth where they live. But Rome’s demand for a census led them to Bethlehem.

With “Date of Birth,” Joseph would not have written in “**December 25, 4 BC.**” He would have used either a lunar calendar or a solar calendar which would have looked very different from how we express dates. And, then there is this difference: he would have gotten the date right because he was there! What we wrote is a best guess based on hindsight and scholarship.

With “Name of Child,” we might have filled in the blank the way Joseph would have, only for different reasons. He might have written in “**Jesus, Son of Joseph**” because he was adopting his fiancé’s child. We wrote the same, but we did so to honor Joseph for being faithful in doing what he did: adopting his fiancé’s child *even though the baby was not his own.*

Today, we get to “Father’s Name.” Joseph would write in his own name, but we are going to fill in the blank in a way that reflects the church’s affirmation of faith concerning this child. Listen for that affirmation in this reading from the first chapter of the Gospel of John:



<sup>14</sup> And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. <sup>15</sup> (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") <sup>16</sup> From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. <sup>17</sup> The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. <sup>18</sup> No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

"Jesus comes of the Holy Spirit," the gospels tell us. John's Gospel gets more specific in telling us that Jesus is God's only son, and that in him God is made know. So, listening to the theological tradition of the church, we have written on our imagined birth certificate "God" for "Father's Name."

But that doesn't say much, does it? "God" is more a reference than a name, don't you think? I mean as Christians, we can wink at each other and say, "We know," but when you look at the way Christians call on God these days—how God is even made to seem hateful to certain people, parochial to certain nations, and indulgent of prejudices and power grabs, we might want to stop winking so our eyes can be more open to what is truly revealed by God.

We need some definition. Maybe we could have written in one of the names for God we find in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, we could have written in the collection of syllables that can only be heard as breath (Yh-Wh) because we live only as God breathes life in us—a name which was later injected with vowels so something could be said: "Yahweh." This is as Jewish a name as can be given God. To write "Yahweh" is to write "The God of the Jews."

Or maybe we could have written in the name that became popular in the Exile, "Elohim," a name which points more to God as the God of all people. To write "Elohim" is to write "The God of the nations." But what does God expect of all nations?

Or we could have written "Adonai" which is not really a name. Adonai means "My Lord," and was used by those who believed that God, *being a mystery*, could not have a name spoken by human lips, but is a God to be obeyed. To write "Adonai" is to write, "The Unnamed God."

You can hear how hesitant the Jewish biblical tradition was in saying too much about God.

- Yahweh: a name of consonants without vowels, a name exclusive to Jews.
- Elohim: a name for a God of all nations, a name exclusive of all other gods.
- And Adonai, a title that is not a name, because no name will do.

The hesitancy comes from a well-developed wisdom about human nature. Humanity has this terrible bad habit of trying to define God in order to control God. We want to name God because we want to claim that name as an endorsement of our own biases and views. And so, God needs to be in some sense unnamable to debunk the illusion that God can be the sole property

- of any empire, or kingdom, or country, or state;
- of any king, governor, president, politician, pope, or pastor;
- of any particular party or cause;
- of any theology, or ideology.



And yet, something needs to be written in the blank and so we write “God.” As Barry Taylor, the road manager for the band AC/DC puts it, “[God is the name of the blanket we throw over mystery to give it shape.](#)”

“[God is the name of the blanket we throw over mystery to give it shape.](#)” I like that. God will be forever beyond our ability to understand, define or control but if God is going to be in any way a holy, real, and transformative presence in our lives, then God needs some kind of defining shape. Some kind of blanket needs to be thrown on the mystery so that we can know something of what it means to be children of God.

But, as I said before, in saying God is the father, something more needs to be said. Simply saying “God” is a Grits name. Grits have little taste until something else is added to it. Something must be added to what is meant by God or we end up adding whatever we want God to mean.

- God can mean “Merciless Judge” if the blanket is just a quilt of God’s demands.
- God can mean “Absent Creator” if the blanket is only the idea that someone had to make the universe and keep it running.
- God can mean “Me,” if God is defined in my image. Then I can pick and choose passages to line up with what I already think and want. Narcissists love that kind of blanket.

What we have written as “Name of Father” will work fine as long as we remember that it is on the same birth certificate with the “Name of Son.” John says that Jesus, as God’s only son, makes God known. The Gospel of John presents Jesus as God’s spitting image. *Jesus is the blanket* that the Gospels use to throw on the mystery that is God to give God shape.

For John’s Gospel, the mystery that is God takes shape the moment Jesus is born. We learn something important about God simply by doing what St. Francis of Assisi did and pay attention to the circumstances of his birth.

St. Francis visited the Holy Land and was inspired when he saw the Bethlehem cave in which many believed Jesus was born. He was in awe of the humble, simple, and impoverished conditions in which Jesus was born. God gained shape for him.

- He saw a God who did not find any part of being human as beneath divine dignity.
- He saw a God who fully embraced the poverty of the human condition.
- He saw in a needy child the God who came to share in the needs of the world.

St. Francis came home to Italy eager to share that vision with his countrymen who said they believed in Jesus but who seemed to worship rampant greed and materialism. He saw Italian princes who overly impoverished the people band felt vindicated by a Jesus portrayed as a figure gilded with gold.

Francis got the pope’s permission to stage a scene—*the first Nativity scene*—inside a cave in Greccio. He set up a manger and filled it with hay, brought in a live ox and donkey, and then invited the townspeople and fellow friars to come see the humble and impoverished staging of



Jesus birth. St. Francis died the very next year, but his tradition of humble and impoverished nativity scenes has remained to this day, even if it is usually a barn that is depicted instead of a cave.

For instance, consider this modern-day example of carrying on St. Francis' tradition told to me by my friend, Joy Sylvester Johnson. Joy lived at the Rescue Mission when her father was the director, and then later when she was the director. She carried on a tradition her father began. Just like other churches in Roanoke those years, the mission would put on its own Nativity Scene. There was placed a structure evoking a barn, a manger, and live animals. And, of course, there was Mary, Joseph, shepherds, angels, and magi; all portrayed by children of families sheltered in the Mission. The subtle point being made is that God finds a home with these displaced families.

We make the same point in our Christmas Eve services, but in a different way. We do not stage a Nativity Scene, but we do take up a Manger Offering for the Family Promise program that helps provide a safe and hospitable place for families in housing crisis. We are simply trying to follow God who finds a home with us all, and that includes finding a bed in a manger and a home with displaced families.

Now, after tomorrow, we need to keep paying attention to how the one born in a cave lives his life. The gospels will tell the story of Jesus' life and so that the blanket will spread and provide more shape.

We will need to

- pay attention to what Jesus does,
- hear what he says,
- and notice how he suffers and dies.

We will need to

- notice the company Jesus keeps,
- the people he helps
- and those who are drawn to him
  - and those who are repelled by him.

We will need to pay attention to

- who and how he forgives,
- how he treats those who speak too confidently of God,
  - and those who are convinced they are sinners,
- how he treats the afflicted
  - and remains in conversation with those whose faith is unsure and searching.

We will need to watch

- as Jesus embodies the Law of Love,
- and how he lives and dies for the sake of reconciliation.



Let's watch how the blanket covering the mystery that is God takes enough shape to let us know that God despises degradation for the sake of power and wealth and values human dignity and the selfless care of God's creation.

We have before us a table set for a meal. This table is one that belongs in any home where Jesus can be found—which is to say,

- at Alexa House and the Rescue Mission;
- in homes bombed out and in places where hostages are held;
- or homes where people are lonely, or sick, or dying;
- and in every home where there is human vulnerability and need—
  - which, of course, includes your home.

God shares in this meal because God shares completely in the vulnerability of being human—even sharing in the suffering that comes in every human life. We will listen to Jesus talk at this meal about his coming again,

and we'll be reminded that just as God was born among us at his birth,  
we will be born again with him at our deaths.

Let's celebrate and enjoy this feast with Emmanuel: God With Us.

