
Your Questions about Christmas

DARRELL DELANEY

Questions are a natural part of faith. It is how we work out what it means to live our faith. As a community, discussing these questions together allows us to clarify what we believe, and think together about what that means for how we live as Christians in our world. Today, we will consider some commonly asked questions about the Christmas season. Stay tuned.

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And for our listeners, we want to say that we really appreciate the messages we get from you, and the questions you send in through e-mail, through physical letters, sometimes messages on our Facebook page for *Groundwork*. Those questions, Darrell, you know, they help inform our *Groundwork* blogs; our on-air content; sometimes we get ideas for whole series from questions and suggestions that people send in as we invite them at the end of every program; and we usually have one or two programs per year where we just focus on some of the questions that have come in; and this time, we have kind of collected all the ones that have anything to do with Christmas, the birth of Christ, and Advent, and we are going to put them all into this program.

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Is it true? Is it important? So, Darrell, I think one thing we can point out as we get going here is that in the New Testament it is clear: You cannot have a gospel without the story of the cross and the resurrection, right? Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John all include the Passion of Christ. In fact, some people have called the four gospels passion narratives with long introductions.

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It is like everything up until the cross is just an introduction. So, you have to have Good Friday; you have to have the cross; you have to have Easter to have a gospel, because that is the essence of the good news. But apparently, Darrell, you can have a gospel without Christmas.

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DARRELL DELANEY

What is interesting is that you just mentioned every single one of the gospels make sure that we don't miss the passion and the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus; but when they tell the stories, how they begin them, they are inspired by the Holy Spirit to emphasize different points. So, Mark doesn't really give us a clue as to where Jesus came from in his gospel; when he was born or whatever. He doesn't go into any of that. He launches right into John the Baptist and the arrival of Christ. Then John, he just says: The Word became flesh, you know, in John 1. He has got like this cosmic introduction. So, it doesn't give us a clue as to when he was born or anything like that; and Matthew gives us a couple of verses in Chapter 1, where it talks about Joseph's perspective of this situation. So, the majority of what we know about the birth of Jesus and Christmastime, if you will, is from Luke.

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From Luke 2. If Luke 2 weren't in the Bible, most everything we associate with Christmas would not exist: The Roman tax, which necessitated Mary and Joseph to go back to their hometown of Bethlehem; the donkey; the stable; the swaddling clothes; the shepherds and the angels. All of that is from Luke 2. In fact, let's just review.

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Luke 2, the first seven verses: In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the whole Roman world. ²(This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria). ³ And everyone went to their own town to register. ⁴So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. ⁵He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guestroom available for them.

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So, we know Luke to be a physician by trade, but we know that he wrote, not only this Gospel of Luke, but the book of Acts; and he wrote them because he is a historian. He was writing to his friend, most excellent Theophilus, that he wanted to make sure that it was an accurate account. So, I am sure he got plenty of interviews from Mary and those around...eyewitnesses...because I don't think he, in fact, met Jesus. I don't think he actually knew him personally; but he brought these facts together, inspired by the Holy Spirit, so we can get an accurate account; and there is this one thing that you often see in nativity scenes in peoples' yards or whatnot. You have the Magi standing around. There are three of them sometimes, and they have gold, frankincense, and myrrh. That actually does not happen, according to scholars, until maybe a couple of years after this. Because it says they move into a house in scripture, and not a manger; and also, Jesus was probably around 2 years old when that happened. So, that is not a part of the original scene that Luke is setting here.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

But we like the Magi, so we bring them in from Matthew 2, even though they are not in Luke 2; and you know, the listener question is: Is this true? Why do we believe it is true? There are a lot of reasons we believe it is true, of course, and we will get to that in a minute, but the scholar, Paul Maier, said that one of the reasons we know it is true is Luke includes some very specific names here that are verifiable from other non-biblical historical sources. It is verifiable history; but of course, Darrell, the other reason we believe it is true is because Luke is narrating this story by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So, that is enough for me; and that is true of the entire Bible; but we also know that of the things that the Holy Spirit did working through Luke, is that Luke was a researcher. He had not been one of the original twelve disciples, so he did research; and he says that very directly; and he obviously interviewed Mary. He obviously had at least a couple of conversations with Mary, because there is a lot of stuff in Luke 1 and 2 that only Mary would have known. So, yes; that is one of the reasons that we believe it. But you know, Darrell, another reason that a lot of people think that this rings true is because it is such an unlikely story.

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But we like the Magi, so we bring them in from Matthew 2, even though they are not in Luke 2; and you know, the listener question is: Is this true? Why do we believe it is true? There are a lot of reasons we believe it is true, of course, and we will get to that in a minute, but the scholar, Paul Maier, said that one of the reasons we know it is true is Luke includes some very specific names here that are verifiable from other non-biblical historical sources. It is verifiable history; but of course, Darrell, the other reason we believe it is true is because Luke is narrating this story by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. So, that is enough for me; and that is true of the entire Bible; but we also know that of the things that the Holy Spirit did working through Luke, is that Luke was a researcher. He had not been one of the original twelve disciples, so he did research; and he says that very directly; and he obviously interviewed Mary. He obviously had at least a couple of conversations with Mary, because there is a lot of stuff in Luke 1 and 2 that only Mary would have known. So, yes; that is one of the reasons that we believe it. But you know, Darrell, another reason that a lot of people think that this rings true is because it is such an unlikely story.

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Yes; and most scholars say because the story is so unlikely, it had to be true. If the things were neatly happening, and the story went to the most important people in the known world that day, if the story went right directly to Herod, or if they didn't use the shepherds with the flocks by night...I mean, why would you trust the entire fate of the world to a manger, a lowly baby in this manger in an obscure place in the Podunk world, where there is no one who is important in the place. So, you have all these things happening that make it more factual as opposed to less.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; more credible. I mean, Jesus' birth made such a little splash. I mean, Luke lists Caesar Augustus and Quirinius and so forth, the bigshots of the day, but they are not privy to Jesus' birth; and most of the Jewish leaders are not privy to Jesus' birth. There are some shepherds, of all people, right? So, it is just so unlikely

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By the way, Darrell, before we close out the first part of this program, there is one other Christmas story in the New Testament. We have noted this one before here on *Groundwork*, but it is the story told in an apocalyptic manner, and it comes from Revelation 12.

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Yes; it says: ^{verse 4b}The dragon stood in front of the woman who was about to give birth, so that it might devour her child the moment he was born. ⁵She gave birth to a son, a male child, who "will rule all the nations with an iron scepter." And her child was snatched up to God and to his throne. ⁶The woman fled into the wilderness to a place prepared for her by God.

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That is a very different take. This is not *Silent Night* here. This shows us, Darrell...it shows us the spiritual stake...the spiritual consequences. The devil did not want this child to be born, and the devil was going to work as hard as he could to make sure it didn't happen; and so, the devil is, you know, shown here to be like a dragon. It was ready to eat that kid the moment it came out of its mother's womb; and God protected it. So, this shows us the stakes were really high. It wasn't just twinkling stars and shepherds and, oh, it is so nice in the stable there in Bethlehem and the serene scenes. Pull back the curtain, this is what was going on; and that is quite amazing. Again, a bracing reminder of how *vital* the event. You can have a gospel without this story, but Jesus did need to be the true Son of God to be our Savior.

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Segment 2

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And again, this is a listener question program. We are looking at questions you have asked of *Groundwork*; and for this episode, we have gathered together, Darrell, various questions that have anything to do with the birth of Christ, Christmas; and some people have asked: Didn't this start out as a pagan holiday? Somebody asked, you know, what was this Saturnalia thing in the Roman Empire? What does that have to do with Christmas? Why do we celebrate it on December 25? So, that is kind of what we are going to look at in this part of this program.

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DARRELL DELANEY

Is it right to celebrate Christmas on December 25 for Christians? Let's talk about where that whole December 25th thing comes from. There was, in fact, a secular festival called Winter Solstice, which this is a time when the shortest day of the year is over, and now we are turning back to the longer days. So, the birth of light is now happening; and so, they would actually spend this time to remember and celebrate Caesar during this time, but also Saturnalia, you mentioned earlier. This is the time when they would actually be thinking: No longer do we have more darkness than light, but it is the darkest day of the year, and it is turning toward light now. So, we are looking at these different things happening, not only the Winter Solstice, but the celebration of Caesar, who was their god and lord at the time, in their world, when they worshipped him. He would be honored during this time, as well. So, those are some of the things that were happening in their midst, and Christians saw this as an opportunity to talk about Christ.

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Exactly; and the ancient peoples feared darkness a lot; in a time long before there were any electric lights or light pollution or anything like that, when it was dark, it was *dark*; and that was a little scary.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the shortest day of the year, and then after that, the days start getting longer, bit by bit; but in the Roman Empire, they connected the return of light to the power of Caesar, right? So, this was part of the cult of Caesar. They regarded Caesar as *deus et dominus*—god and lord of the empire. So, it was definitely a pagan festival celebrating the feast day to the emperor. December 25 was the feast day to the emperor—to the Caesar. So, the early Christians thought: Well, we are going to hijack that. We don't believe that Caesar is God. We do believe that Jesus is God. So, we are going to steal your December 25 feast day to the emperor and make it the feast day to the birth of Jesus.

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That is the shortest day of the year, and then after that, the days start getting longer, bit by bit; but in the Roman Empire, they connected the return of light to the power of Caesar, right? So, this was part of the cult of Caesar. They regarded Caesar as *deus et dominus*—god and lord of the empire. So, it was definitely a pagan festival celebrating the feast day to the emperor. December 25 was the feast day to the emperor—to the Caesar. So, the early Christians thought: Well, we are going to hijack that. We don't believe that Caesar is God. We do believe that Jesus is God. So, we are going to steal your December 25 feast day to the emperor and make it the feast day to the birth of Jesus.

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Yes; and so, John picks that up: The light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overcome it. The light that made the world is now coming into the world; and so, Jesus himself even claims, in John's gospel, that he is the light of the world. And so, it makes sense that Christians would take those notes and actually apply them here; because, if you think about it, Scott, we really don't know the actual day...

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That Jesus was born; but, I mean, we don't really know the actual day *we* were born. We actually take the word of the people who were witnesses around us: Oh, I was born on this day. Okay, we put it on the birth certificate. How he lived is really more important than the actual day he was born; but they decided to take this day and say: Listen, we are going to show you who the *real* light of the world is. We are going to bring it to Jesus.

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You know, we have a really good idea when Good Friday was because it was tied to Passover. We have a good idea when Easter was, when Pentecost was, and the Ascension forty days later and fifty days later; but we don't even know what time of the year. We don't know what season it was when Jesus was born; but as you just said, it is really not all that important. But let's also think about why celebrating the birth is theologically important, because the birth of Jesus is weighty, and the doctrine of the virgin birth is a key to the firm declaration of the Orthodox Church all along the ages, that Jesus is fully divine and fully human. So, no male human being was involved in the conception of Jesus, which shows that his conception—his life was miraculous. It is of divine origins, but it also says that the same Holy Spirit who put that divine human zygote into Mary's womb, that Spirit shielded the child from inheriting the original sin the rest of us got born with. So, he has to be fully human, but he cannot be sinful.

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Yes; it makes sense, because when Mary, who asked this question in Luke: How can this be? She says: I am a virgin; I don't know what you are talking about. How can this happen? Then the angel says: The Holy Spirit will *overshadow* you, and you will become pregnant; and so, that would be how he is born; and so, because Joseph was not used in that situation, being the man is the one who brings the generation of sin into the picture, and Mary was a carrier in this situation, the Holy Spirit is the one who inspired her in order to be the one who gives her the holy birth; and that is why he can be fully divine *and* fully human.

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Matthew tips his hat in this direction, too, at the end of his genealogy—the family tree of Jesus in Matthew 1. You’ve got like this whole long string of so-and-so was the father of so-and-so was the father- was the father- the father...and then you get to Joseph, and it is Joseph...the *husband* of Mary, not the father of Jesus.

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Anyway, just really quickly, some of our Roman Catholic friends are aware that the Roman Catholic Church declared a teaching a long time ago called the *immaculate conception*, but that is not Jesus’ conception. The immaculate conception was *Mary’s* conception, because the Catholic Church wants to claim that the Holy Spirit kept *Mary* from inheriting original sin; and that is just a further firewall to keep all sin away from Jesus. Protestants don’t see any biblical evidence for that. So, we accept the idea that Mary was in sin like everybody else, but the Holy Spirit still could take Jesus’ human nature from Mary without the sin part coming along for the ride; and Darrell, this is key, Jesus being sinless. It is a linchpin in the doctrine of justification. I mean, he had to suffer and die for *our* sins, not his own.

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Yes; there is no way he could have atoned for our sins in a perfect and spotless way if he was also tainted with that same sin; and so, that is why the prophet Isaiah makes it clear what Jesus has done in his sacrifice for us. Now that we know that he has been born without sin, it says in Chapter 53, picking up at verse 4, it says: Surely he (being Jesus) took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities, the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

So, he didn’t have any sins of his own to atone for, so he willingly took on our guilt—he took on our shame; and when he suffered, he suffered for us. So, Christmas gives us a chance to reflect on that truth of justification; and it gives us a chance to remember the deeds of the Lord. We are going to talk about that in the final segment in a few minutes, too; but think of these words from Psalm 77, beginning at verse 11: I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. ¹²I will consider all your

works and meditate on all your mighty deeds. ¹³Your ways, God, are holy. What god is as great as our God? ¹⁴You are the God who performs miracles; you display your power among the peoples. ¹⁵With your mighty arm you redeemed your people, the descendants of Jacob and Joseph.

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So, is Christmas true? Is it important? Yes, okay; two of the four gospels don't really talk about the birth of Jesus, but theologically, Darrell, we really believe that this is a vital doctrine because it ties in with the sinlessness of Jesus; it ties in with the full humanity and the full divinity of Jesus; he is one single person with two natures, and those two things let him take our place, as humans; but since he is also God, he can then forgive us; and when he gets punished for us, then we are the ones who inherit salvation. So, we are going to close out this program with a question about the Christian tradition of the season of Advent. So, stay tuned for that.

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Segment 3

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DARRELL DELANEY

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SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, the next question on this listener question program reflects on the Christian tradition surrounding Advent. What is Advent, our listeners have asked. Why do some churches observe Advent and others don't? So, in this segment, we want to define Advent, talk about it, why it could be important; why it could be optional. So, anyway, let's just begin that the word *Advent* is from the Latin and it means *arrival*...it very simply means arrival. It celebrates the coming of God's Son into this world.

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DARRELL DELANEY

Advent is one of those marks in the Christian season. What we taught the children is this is how the Church tells time. Advent is this time, then there is Lent, there is Pentecost. There is ordinary time and there are other things happening, but Advent is the time of the year where we are preparing for Jesus' arrival; and so, we spend the four weeks of Advent talking about these different aspects of people who are talking about either prophecies or different things that run up and lead to the actual birth of Jesus; and we have different ways to explain that. So, we wanted to make sure the people knew that this is why we do this; and not every church does it because the scripture doesn't say: Thou shalt celebrate Advent...

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SCOTT HOEZEE

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DARRELL DELANEY

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; churches that pay attention to liturgical colors...some churches have now changed the liturgical color for Advent from purple to blue; blue seeming just to stand for anticipation of Christ's arrival—his advent. The color purple was used for a long time, and it is still in many churches. It is the same color for the season of Lent because there is a penitential aspect to Advent. We confess the sins that necessitated the Son of God becoming a human being in the first place. It is a time to celebrate the incarnation; and Advent traditionally has *two* advents. It's got Jesus' *first* advent in mind in Bethlehem, but we also anticipate his *second* advent, when he returns again on clouds of glory; and so, in that sense, Advent gets us ready with anticipation for both Advents. We remember the one in the past, and like the ten virgins, we keep watch for the advent that is to come, and we are prepared. So, we think about that. It kind of connects, too, to a lot of festivals we see in the Old Testament. There are a lot of things, like in Leviticus 23. God wanted the Israelites to set aside time to remember. I like what you just said there, Darrell; kind of it is our way of telling time as Christians.

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DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, in our time now today, we live between the two Advents—we live between the first Advent of Jesus' birth and the second Advent of his return; and so, when we celebrate this time during the year, we are remembering...we are reflecting...we are believing...we are repenting...and we are trusting in the Advent that we are going to celebrate on Christmas, but we are also thinking forward to: When he comes back, he will wipe every tear. There will be no crying; no sickness; no sorrow; no racism; no discrimination; no problems; no brokenness; no poverty; and we cannot wait until that comes; but we get to celebrate it in small ways in this season.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

So, is it required? As you said, no. Can it be helpful, though? Yes, like a lot of spiritual disciplines, yes, it can be helpful to rehearse the great things of God; to tell the old, old story all over again so to keep it as a living memory for the people of faith. That led us to think of Psalm 78: My people, hear my teaching; listen to the words of my mouth. ²I will open my mouth with a parable; I will utter hidden things, things from of old— ³things we have heard and known, things our ancestors have told us. ⁴We will not hide them from our descendants; we will tell the next generation the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord, his power, and the wonders he has done. ⁵He decreed statutes for Jacob and established the law in Israel, which he commanded our ancestors to teach their children, ⁶so the next generation would know them, even the children yet to be born, and they in turn would tell their children.

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We love to tell the story because not only does it refresh our faith to tell the story again, but when we get to tell it to younger people, or people who haven't heard this message, the good news becomes good indeed, because they see the hope in it, and they see the love of God in it. So, it is really powerful to see how we can transfer these stories. We cannot transfer our faith, but we can transfer what God has done, and make sure they know this is the same God who wants to have a relationship with everyone.

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Yes; so, if we move away from all of the commercial and all the sales and all the things that the consumeristic world wants us to focus on, and we focus on the real reason for the season being Jesus' birth, then we realize what great gift God has given us; because he gave us this gift while we were yet sinners; and while we were still in our sins, he showed us the divine part of his love by giving us the best gift ever; and that is one reason why we exchange gifts.

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SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and you know, I love Christmas carols as much as everybody else: *Joy to the World, Hark, the Harold Angels Sing*, but the Church, over its history, has developed a lot of great Advent hymns, which tend to go a little bit deeper than maybe just your average Christmas carol about the stable in Bethlehem and all that; and so, we sing those hymns across the Advent season. So, is it required? No; but is it helpful? I think it really is.

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DARRELL DELANEY

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