



Matthew 1:20, 21 “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.”

Grace to you and peace, in the name of Jesus Christ, the Word who is born anew. It is such a joy to share the latest news of our life and ministry in Sénégal in time for the 12 days of Christmastide. This Advent we began the liturgical year of Matthew, and this week I have been preparing to preach on the text for the fourth week of the season. Matthew 1:18-25. “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way...” The nativity narratives in Matthew and Luke are some of the most familiar texts in the Bible. But hearing familiar stories in a different context gives us the chance to hear something new.

This Advent, we are living with these familiar texts in a new, and different context. As a family, we have been preparing this Advent without any of the seasonal trappings that are traditional in the US and Europe. In Senegal, there are two seasons, wet and dry. “Cold”, means 80° days, and 65° at night. There is the occasional man on the street selling an artificial Christmas tree and tinsel for a few Franks. But in Senegal, which is predominately Muslim, there are no public, commercial or cultural cues to trigger your Advent preparation. Even the earth at this latitude renders the European symbols of Christmas a bit non-sensical. Candles and the evergreen are hardly the only symbols of light and life in the midst of nature's dark, cold death, as we are still harvesting fruit during our long, warm December days. While all this was a bit disorienting at the beginning of Advent, the Senegalese context is a liberating invitation to reconsider these symbols and texts of the season.



Sand and Palms for Advent

And so, as a way to reflect on the nativity of Jesus in the context of Islam in the global south, I compared the Gospel versions to the story of the birth of Jesus in the Quran that is found in the nineteenth Surah (chapter), titled “Maryam” (Mary). Like Luke, it begins with the prophecy to Zachariah and the birth of John, followed by the angel's announcement to Mary that Jesus is a blessing from God conceived by the Holy Spirit. The Quran says the day of Jesus' birth will be remembered as a blessed day. And Senegalese Muslims, including Babacar, our night guard, Néné, our femme de menage, shopkeepers, neighbors and colleagues keep track of our preparations and wish us a joyous Noel. The Quran puts these words in the mouth of Jesus, “So peace is on me the day I was born, the day that I die, and the Day that I shall be raised up to life again!” (19:33)



Muslim icon of Mary

But one aspect of the Quran's telling of Jesus' birth struck me this year – the loneliness of Mary. After receiving the message from the Angel, Mary retires alone to the East where she suffers a painful child-birth, all alone under a date palm. God provides the dates to eat and a stream to cool her thirst (like Hagar and Ishmael in Genesis). But Mary intentionally leaves her relatives, puts up a screen to shield her from everyone, and vows a fast from talking with any one else for a lengthy period of time. There is only Mary and her baby, under a palm tree in the desert. (19:16-26) What a striking, lonely contrast when compared to Luke and Matthew.

The Gospels go to great lengths to remind us that Mary is not alone.

Even when it would be right and just for Joseph to quietly dismiss his pregnant betrothed, God sends a messenger to guide Joseph in another way. “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:20) This is a virgin birth, and if you disregard the theological point that Matthew is making about Jesus being in the house of David, Joseph is not necessary! The Quran suggests that Mary doesn't need Joseph or anyone else for that matter. But Matthew and Luke show us God's will for relationship.

Mary was not to be left alone in the desert under a palm tree to deliver her baby. God's Angels are present at the annunciation and the birth. Joseph faithfully commits to staying in relationship. Elisabeth shares her wisdom and solidarity with her young niece. Social taboos were broken as she was surrounded by a group of shepherds who provided company and affirmation. The stable animals give some creaturely warmth. And rather than fast from speaking to anyone, she treasures the words of foreign visitors in her heart long after the birth of her child. In the past, I tended to focus on the outcast nature of the holy family, and the fact that no one made room for them in their time of need. But in the context of the Quran's version, I was actually struck this year by the profound relationality that surrounded Mary at Jesus' birth. While Mary was on the margins of the powers that be, Jesus was born into a divinely inspired network of caring relationships.

God's will for relationality was revealed in the birth of Emmanuel, God with us. Like all newborn babies, even Jesus needed a network of life giving relationships to survive. And the Gospels go to great lengths to show us the wonderful truth that while Mary was on the margins, she was not alone. Feminist, liberation and African theologians have long suggested that this kind of relationality should be our starting point for theology. Life is rooted in the mysterious relationship of a Triune God, and we are profoundly relational creatures. Life begins and thrives in relationship. This is a truth that mothers and their new born babies realize. It is a truth that the poor and oppressed have always known, and the experience of daily life and ministry in the global south reveals this truth.



Luke and a new friend

Most Senegalese women, like Mary, live at the margins of the global economy. For most women and their children, social networks of care can be the difference between life and death. We have experienced stories of women sharing resources to assure children are fed, educated and healed. As part of the ELCA's ministry here in Senegal, there exists a micro-credit bank called “Woolonte” that provides loans for women to turn their skills into income generating businesses. This micro-credit agency is a result of the will for life-giving relationality that exists among women all over the globe. Another word for this profound, life-giving relationality is communion, and we are blessed to witness the life-giving power of communion through the ELCA Global Mission in Senegal.



Paul Michael with the Talibé

In this season of Advent, the boys have experienced this life-giving communion through meaningful encounters with boys called “Talibé” who roam the streets of Dakar begging for money. Natalie has experienced this profound communion with the Women of the ELS. Chad experiences this communion alongside pastors, students, catechists and members of the ELS's 12 parishes serving in ministries of education, literacy, health care, water resource management, animal husbandry, and Christian formation. And this Christmas Eve, we will celebrate the

baptism of a young boy who asked to become part of this life giving communion that he began to experience through the care of his Christian friends. This small, young Lutheran Church that is on the margins of society bears witness to the way that Christian community, rooted in the sacramental relationship to the Spirit of God, continues to share the life that was first born in Bethlehem.



Chad meeting with leaders of Linguère parish

And our family experiences this life-giving communion in relationship to you, our sponsoring congregations and friends in Global Mission. You sponsor our ministry through Global Sponsorship, and you support the work of the ELS and the SLDS through your faithful giving to ELCA Global Mission, World Hunger, and other projects. We all feel your supportive presence by your prayers and your communication with us. You are part of the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds us and our friends of the Lutheran Church of Senegal every day. We take great comfort this Christmas knowing we are not alone. Your participation in the ELCA Global Mission ensures that life-giving ministry can be sustained here in Senegal and throughout the

Lutheran World Federation. We pray that you also feel the thanks and prayers of our family and your friends in the ELS. Like Mary, none of us are ever alone. The birth of Jesus reminds us that the path to life comes through profound, global relationality with God and one another. And this is the sign. That unto us is born this day, a son, Emmanuel, God with us.

Merci à vous tous, et que la paix du Christ soit avec vous,
Pastor Chad, Natalie, Paul Michael and Luke Rimmer

(p.s. Don't forget to check our website, www.therimmers.org, for updates, blogs, ideas and images or leave a message on the message board for our sponsoring congregations. You can find us facebook, too!)



Pastor Chad, Natalie, Paul Michael and Luke with our friend Tapha of the SLDS on the festival of Tabaski