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Outside the manger, a challenge of faith

By Peter Smith
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Angels splitting the sky to bring good news to shepherds. Wise men following a miraculous star. A virgin giving birth to a messiah in a quiet stable.

These are the themes that churches around the world are celebrating today and Wednesday in song, Scripture and sermon in one of the most sacred days on their calendar.

But when preachers look out on Christmas Eve at their congregations -- the ranks of regulars swollen by out-of-towners, twice-a-year visitors and sullen, dragged-along relatives -- they may be facing more skeptics than they used to.

Just under half of Americans believe the biblical accounts surrounding Christmas -- such as the virgin birth, angels and wise men -- are historically accurate.

That's according to a survey by the Public Religion Research Institute and Religion News Service, which found that another 40 percent of people believe the narratives compose a "theological story."

In 2004, in contrast, two-thirds of Americans believed in the historical truth of the entire biblical Nativity accounts, according to a Newsweek poll.

Chances are, preachers are talking to the converted. The groups most likely to believe in the literal truth of the Nativity are also the most likely to be in church on Christmas Eve.

But Christmas also draws many who are unchurched -- the least likely to believe.

Some pastors say their approach is a straightforward retelling of the story, confident in its historical truth.

"I don't try and prove how right the Nativity" story is, said the Rev. Samuel W. Chambers Sr., pastor of Wayman Chapel African Methodist Episcopal Church in New Brighton. "God needs no proof. Either you believe in Him or you don't."

The Rev. James B. Farnan, pastor of St. Thomas More Catholic Church in Bethel Park, agreed.

"You can't deny the historical nature of sacred Scripture," he said. Noting that the gospels quote Hebrew Scripture passages they say were fulfilled in Jesus, Father Farnan added: "His is the only birth that has been predicted not only when and where but to what family and to what person."

Other preachers say they don't insist on belief in the details of the account but urge listeners to focus on what they see as the main message of passages -- God becoming human to save humanity.

"The Christian faith is about way more than belief in the historical accuracy of every detail of the biblical story," said the Rev. Roger Owens, professor of leadership and ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary.

"Just as the angels in the Bible so often say when they appear to someone, 'Do not be afraid,' I would say to preachers: 'Do not fear,'" added Rev. Owens, who is speaking from experience: He preached for five years at Duke Memorial United Methodist Church in Durham, N.C., to a congregation of well-educated and potentially skeptical hearers.

"You will be doing your congregation a great service if you move from the peripheral details to the center," he said. "Belief in the virgin birth might be a late development, and it might not be attested to in every gospel, but if that's what your faith stands on, it's a flimsy faith. In Jesus, God took on flesh, and became truly human. This is the heart."

Only four of the 89 chapters in the gospels talk about Jesus' conception and birth, and yet the stories are among the best-known in all the Bible, celebrated in hymns from ancient times to the present, depicted in countless works of art and re-enacted in multitudes of pageants featuring kids in bathrobes portraying shepherds.

Christians have included Jesus' virgin birth as part of their creeds since ancient times; in the 1920s, Protestant fundamentalists insisted that belief in the virgin birth be considered an essential of Christian faith; Roman Catholic dogma teaches that Mary remained a virgin her whole life and was herself conceived without sin.

Yet the growing skepticism comes amid two related trends.

One is the growing ranks of people claiming no religious affiliation -- now approaching 20 percent. They are the most likely to doubt the Nativity accounts. At the same time, evangelical Protestants, who overwhelmingly affirm the historical accuracy of the accounts, are shrinking, said Robert Jones, chief executive officer of Public Religion Research Institute.

The other trend is the continued debate among Jesus scholars over how much of the gospels are historically accurate in every detail -- and whether it's necessary to believe that in order to believe Christian essentials. A recent best-seller, for example, Reza Aslan's "Zealot," disputes the notion that Jesus of Nazareth was born in Bethlehem.

Scholars who question the narratives of Christmas bring a number of challenges: that the earliest gospel -- Mark -- and epistles said almost nothing about the birth of Jesus, to a virgin or otherwise, and that the two gospels that do tell about it give radically different accounts.

Only the gospel of Matthew, for example, tells of Joseph's dreams, the Wise Men or of King Herod murdering the infants of Bethlehem. Only the gospel of Luke tells of the shepherds or John the Baptist's own miraculous conception.

"That both accounts are completely historical ... must be ruled out," wrote the late Rev. Raymond Brown, a Roman Catholic priest and leading biblical scholar in his book, "The Birth of the Messiah," a 1977 volume that set out the terms of the debates in meticulous detail.

Father Brown said each gospel includes events that would have been recorded in Jewish or pagan histories if they really happened -- such as Luke's account of a global census and Matthew's description of how the wise men's visit sent all of Jerusalem into a panic.

But, Father Brown added, the narratives share many characteristics, such as proclamations that Jesus was the messiah and born of a virgin in Bethlehem, and they use their narratives to make important points: That Jesus followed in the traditions of Moses and King David, would save his people and reach the lowly (shepherds) and foreigners (wise men).

No one writing about a messiah, said biblical scholar Ben Witherington III of Asbury Theological Seminary in Kentucky, would make up a story that would lead people to question the legitimacy of his birth -- unless it were true.

"This is an honor-and-shame culture," Mr. Witherington said. "We're talking about a pregnancy out of wedlock in that culture, which could result in stoning. The idea that two gospel writers would independently make up a story about virginal conception is beyond credulity."

He said Bethlehem was so small that even a massacre there would be likely to escape public notice.

As for the angels and the star: "Unless you have an allergic reaction to the miraculous in general, then these stories are believable stories."

The Rev. Dean Weaver, pastor of Memorial Park Church, a Presbyterian church in Hampton, said that while he affirms the historical truth of the narratives, he doesn't use Christmas sermons to win over skeptics.

"Typically at Christmastime, it's not about arguments or proof-texting or skepticism, it's really about the beauty and the mystery of the Christmas narrative, and people entering into the fact that God came into the world because he loves us," he said.

Plus, he said, "at Christmastime, you hope there's some willingness to entertain the idea that the supernatural is actually real. Most people at this time of year, even if they're skeptical, they're open to at least wanting to believe that."

Rev. Owens echoed the thought, summarizing his advice for preachers: "Despite what surveys say, you should step into your pulpit believing that the people there long to believe, because they do. They've lived in religion obsessed long enough with who's in and who's out, who's got it right, and who's got it wrong, and they are tired and they want to believe."

Do you believe . . .

A December survey of Americans by the Public Religion Research Institute asked the following, similar to a 2004 survey question asked by Newsweek

"Do you believe the story of Christmas -- that is, the Virgin birth, the angelic proclamation to the Shepherds, the Star of Bethlehem, and the Wise Men from the East -- is historically accurate, or is it a theological story to affirm faith in Jesus Christ?"

2004, general public:

Historical: 67 percent

Theological: 24 percent

2013, general public:

Historical: 49 percent

Theological: 40 percent

Don't know/Refused: 11 percent

2013, subgroups who say accounts are historical:

White evangelical Protestants: 80 percent

Minority Protestants: 62 percent

White mainline Protestants: 56 percent

Catholics, 51 percent

Unaffiliated, 19 percent

Seniors: 50 percent

Adults 50-64: 56 percent

Adults under 30: 42 percent

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Catholics call it the ‘Pope Francis Effect’: ‘The new pope has made being Catholic cool’

By Peter Smith
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

In an intimate ceremony at SS. Simon and Jude Church in Scott on a recent weekday afternoon, Christopher Fox bowed his head as the Rev. Jay Donahue dipped a seashell into a font of holy water and poured it on him three times, baptizing him in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Mr. Fox then donned a floor-length alb, or white robe, a symbol of his baptism, and was confirmed into the Roman Catholic Church.

His confirmation name: Francis.

It was mainly a tribute to his late father's name, but it was also a salute to the new pope, who has fired the imagination of many Catholics and non-Catholics alike with a bracing series of humble actions, blunt criticisms of church bureaucrats and conciliatory gestures to the marginalized.

Mr. Fox said he was already in the process of joining the church when Francis became pope, but "with the pope coming along, it just added that spark to it all."

It's been called the "Pope Francis effect."

Priests locally and internationally say they're seeing a bump in interest in the church through the pope.

But while there are anecdotes of people joining or returning to the church under the influence of Francis, there's no proof yet that such anecdotes add up to a broad trend.

Pope Francis' name and @pontifex Twitter handle have become some of the most searched terms on the Internet. The pontiff has been named Time magazine's Person of the Year and he enjoys high popularity in polls -- rated favorably by four in five U.S. Catholics and more than half the American general public, according to the Pew Research Center. Italian priests tell researchers they see a rise in Mass attendance,

But since Francis became pope, there is no measurable increase in Americans either identifying themselves as Catholic (around 22 percent) or in reporting they're attending Mass more frequently (with about 40 percent continuing to say they attend weekly), according to Pew.

Georgetown University-based researchers into Catholic trends have come up with similarly stable numbers. But there's a big caveat, said Mark Gray, a research associate and director of Catholic polling at Georgetown's Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate.

Typically, he said, a survey would have a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percentage points, meaning that any changes that are less than that cannot be considered significant. Given the large America Catholic population -- the nation's largest denomination -- "you'd need to see a shift of more than 1.7 million adults either way to discern any minor change," he said. In other words, the Francis effect would have to be massive even to move the needle a little bit.

But by 2014, when Catholic dioceses start reporting data on their sacraments, they'll know more precisely what's been happening in 2013, Mr. Gray said.

In the meantime, there are the anecdotes.

"His theology is really simple: Love your neighbor as yourself," said Catholic Deacon Cliff Homer, chief operating officer for Catholic Charities in Pittsburgh. Stories of the pope embracing a severely deformed man, or sending money to an elderly woman who was robbed on a bus while on the way to see her hospitalized husband, give preachers "great opportunities" for sermon illustrations that parishioners can relate to, Mr. Homer said.

Francis has declared himself a "son of the church," loyal to its teachings, but he has also called on the church not to be "obsessed" with culture-war issues such as abortion, contraception and gay marriage. And he has made sweeping condemnations of clerical privilege, calling for "shepherds living with the smell of the sheep."

Getting to the altar

For Mr. Fox and his wife Cynthia, Pope Francis helped seal long journeys to the altar, in more than one sense.

Mr. Fox grew up in England in a Protestant church that was so strict, "our whole family dropped out and I've been wandering around aimlessly without religion for nearly 35 years."

It wasn't until he met Cynthia -- herself a cradle Catholic who had been alienated from the church but was on the road back to it -- that he found his spiritual home.

They began attending regularly and were married legally, but they wanted to have a Catholic church wedding. That took some doing. Both had been married previously. She had an earlier marriage annulled, but they waited a long time for Mr. Fox to receive what's known as the "Petrine privilege" -- papal permission to dissolve the marriage of a non-baptized person. His long-languishing petition was quickly approved after Francis assumed the papacy. The couple was married on Dec. 12, three days after Mr. Fox's baptism and confirmation.

Mr. Fox believes the pontiff's repeated calls for more pastoral priests has goaded Vatican bureaucrats into swifter action.

"Whether this had been part of the process or not, the way the pope has just opened up the Catholic world to the world -- I think he's been an incredible man," Mr. Fox said.

Cynthia Fox is also impressed.

"I always knew I'd be back" in the church, she said. But "the new pope has made being Catholic cool. He's nothing but cool."

Francis' "leadership by example not by words is a refreshing change," Father Donahue said.

Father Donahue said that during Pittsburgh's recent Light Up Night, he and others from the diocese stood at Point State Park with a life-sized cutout of Pope Francis and offered people a chance to have their picture taken with it. Not only did people enthusiastically respond, but many young people posed giving high-fives to the pope's upraised hand.

And he said many people came to his parish on Dec. 11 when churches throughout the diocese were encouraging people to come to confession, even if they had been away for years, under the slogan, "The Light is Still on for You."

"We had people who had not been in church for over 30 years," he said, with four hours of steady confessions heard by three priests. "The best part was just creating a warm and welcoming place for people to encounter Christ," he said.

Bishop David Zubik said he was hearing confessions for hours himself at the cathedral that night, and he's heard similar anecdotes of the Francis effect in recent months.

"People who may have felt for one reason or another disenfranchised, universally are saying they see a great deal of hope," Bishop Zubik said.

"That's exactly what he's trying to fire up in people's hearts, that sense of hope," the bishop said. He added that many parishes have been increasing their collections of food for the needy in recent years -- showing they are already in sync with the pontiff's call for a church "for the poor."

Justin Petrovich, a senior at Saint Vincent College in Latrobe, experienced Francis' impact firsthand while attending World Youth Day in Brazil, an international Catholic festival that drew about 3 million people. Mr. Petrovich had planned to attend anyway -- after working for several days with local Catholics at a mission for the poor -- but he said the new pope electrified the crowd.

"I never got to see him close-up, but it was awesome just being in his presence," Mr. Petrovich said.

He said the experience confirmed his belief in making an impact. "You always hear the phrase, making the church alive, and I really think he's done that; he shows that the church can be alive."

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November 19, 1863
150 YEARS LATER
THE GETTYSBURG ADDRESS

Address had biblical cadence

President Lincoln's audience then would have realized, far better than we do today, just how religious the famous Gettysburg speech was

By Peter Smith
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Picture a U.S. president today telling his people, "You must be born again." Or comparing the nation's life cycle to that of Jesus Christ. Or waving the banner of John 3:16 while he was at it, like an evangelistic football fan captured on TV near the end zone.

Abraham Lincoln wasn't nearly as blunt as all that on the fabled November afternoon of his Gettysburg Address, but his audience then would have realized, far better than we do today, just how religious that speech was.

"Although he never names the Bible, the whole of the speech is really suffused with the Bible in terms of both the content and the cadence," said historian Ronald C. White Jr., author of a biography and two other books about Lincoln, all of them closely examining the 16th president's rhetoric.

Lincoln wasn't preaching but rather putting the Bible in the service of "American civil religion," which sociologist Robert Bellah described as "a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals that ... reaffirms, among other things, the religious legitimation of the highest political authority."

Lincoln's audience would have known the biblical allusions in the address, beginning with "four score and seven years," invoking language from a Psalm. Even people familiar with the Bible today use myriad modern translations. But in Lincoln's day, almost every Protestant who read the Bible used the archaic but subtle intonations of the 17th-century King James Version, which by then had been shaping the English language for more than two centuries.

In fact, Lincoln referred to that version as the "Saxon Bible," according to Mr. White, a reference to its terse directness. More than two-thirds of the words of the Gettysburg Address are one syllable, which made it especially supple in the hands of a gifted speaker. But the plain words also served as a background in which important concepts to Lincoln -- "proposition," "dedicate," "consecrate," "liberty," stand out starkly.

"The Gettysburg Address is wonderful to the ear, just to hear it," Mr. White said. "I encourage readers to say it out and they will hear the cadence."

Lincoln began his address by alluding to the Declaration of Independence in 1776 as the founding of the American Republic -- rebutting those who dated the nation from the later Constitution, which accommodated slavery. Lincoln, in this and earlier speeches, sought to show that the nation had a primal and more universal ideal -- that "all men are created equal."

"Lincoln distinguished between the Declaration as the statement of a permanent ideal and the Constitution as an early and provisional embodiment of that ideal, to be tested against it," wrote author Garry Wills in his Pulitzer Prize-winning 1992 book "Lincoln at Gettysburg: The Words That Remade America."

Mr. Wills said this idea has religious roots. Lincoln, according to his one-time law partner William Herndon, was strongly influenced by Theodore Parker, a Unitarian minister from Boston and an advocate of Transcendentalism, a movement that promoted the purity of inner ideals and individualism over corrupted social customs and laws.

Parker himself contrasted pure piety -- "love of God, and morality" -- with the conventions of the Christian church and other sects. Similarly, the abolitionist Parker said, the U.S. Constitution is a "provisional compromise between the ideal political principle of the Declaration, and the actual selfishness of the people North and South."

But rather than merely say this took place "87 years" before the 1863 gathering at Gettysburg, Lincoln opened with "Four score and seven years ago" (a score being 20 years).

This recalls Psalm 90, which emphasizes the limits of human life: "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength, they be fourscore years, yet ... it is soon cut off, and we fly away."

By that measure, America had by 1863 outlived a human life, and Lincoln had frequently called on his contemporaries to live up to the ideas of the passed generation of American founders.

The comparison of American history to a human life cycle permeates the address. The American founders were "our fathers," and they "brought forth" the new nation, echoing the King James Version's phrase in the Gospel of Luke that Mary "brought forth" her son, Jesus.

The nation was "conceived in liberty" and "dedicated" -- a word often used with rites of passage, such as Jesus' official presentation at the temple in the Gospel of Luke -- "to the proposition" of human equality.

Lincoln urges his hearers to "dedicate" themselves to the cause for which the soldiers gave their "last full measure of devotion."

"They're religious words" and "commitment words," Mr. White said, familiar in the open-air revivals of the day. Even though Lincoln himself distrusted the emotionalism of such revivals, the same language also coursed through the more learned sermons he was hearing at his own church in Washington, Mr. White said.

"They come right out of the Second Great Awakening, and they are words he would have heard at the New York Avenue Presbyterian Church, where he was worshiping with increased frequency."

Finally, the nation's "new birth of liberty" hearkens to the language of the Bible and the spirituality of Lincoln's own day, Mr. White said. The hope that the nation should not "perish" also echoes chapter 3 of the Gospel of John, when Jesus tells a grown man he must be "born again" and, in verse 16, that those who believe in Jesus "should not perish."

David Zarefsky, a Northwestern University professor emeritus of communications who has written widely on presidential rhetoric, sees the Gettysburg Address as emblematic of Lincoln's thinking. "As the war went on, Lincoln was increasingly drawn to a spiritual and theological explanation for the war because he felt that was the only way he could make any sense of it," he said.

With the amount of killing and destruction reaching biblical proportions, he said, "there had to be some kind of higher purpose" in Lincoln's mind.

The late poet Robert Lowell went so far as to call the Gettysburg Address a "sacramental act."

"By his words, he gave the field of battle a symbolic significance that it has lacked," Lowell wrote. "For us and our country, he left Jefferson's ideals of freedom and equality joined to the Christian sacrificial act of death and rebirth."