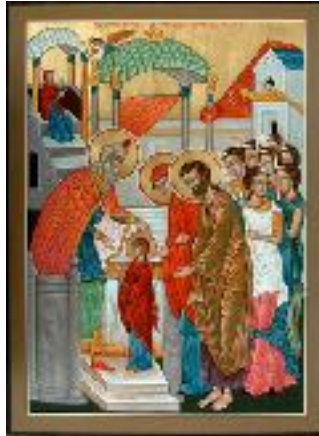


Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Sunday, August 22, 2020

“The *Protoevangelium* of James’: A Preface to Christmas”

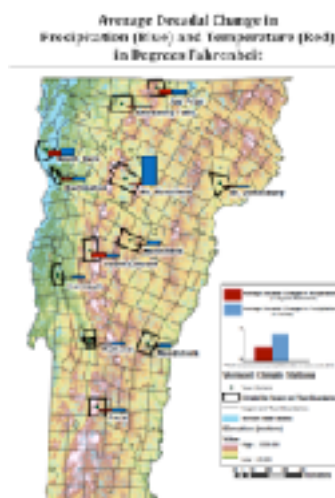


Fourth in a five sermon series entitled:
“Many Perspectives: The *Other* Gospels”

The Reverend Dr. Scott Everett Couper

Christian Scripture: Matthew 1:18-25

Now, don't get me wrong. I have loved Vermont's long summer days.



But this week in the mornings, I felt for the first time this season a little chill in the air. Aaahhh! And I felt a little giddy. Perhaps you did too. Autumn and winter are coming. On Wednesday and Thursday, I wore my Vermont flannel shirts to work. Honestly, for the rest of the week, I kept looking out my windows at the Brooks House hoping to see some flurries.



Soon, it will be Christmas! I know I am getting ahead of myself. But, it's not my fault.



You see, the gospel of James that we examine today is quite the 'preface to Christmas', an introduction to the nativity narrative as told in the gospels of

Matthew and Luke. So, you will forgive me if I anticipate too much colder temperatures and the celebration of Jesus' birth.



Our scripture this morning recounts the familiar tale. Matthew began with Jesus' genealogy (1:1-17) then moved quickly to how angels revealed to Joseph that Mary would give birth to a Savior (1:18-25). Jesus was born (2:1). Astrologers from the east arrived with gifts (2:2-6) and Herod began his quest to snuff out the infant interloper who would challenge the throne (2:7-23). All of this is great stuff! But, wait a minute! From chapter one to chapter two we moved from Jesus' genealogy straight to his birth. And more than that, we only are told of Joseph's side of the family. There is so much we don't know. I've got a thousand questions! How did Mary and Joseph meet? Who were Mary's parents, and thus Jesus' grandparents? Was Mary really a virgin, before, during, and after Jesus' birth? I remember in the scriptures it says that Jesus had brothers and sisters (Mark 6:3, Matthew 13:55-56, and Mark 3:31-32). More than that, James, who became a leader of the church in

Jerusalem was Jesus' brother and is said to have written the gospel we study today. How did Jesus have brothers and sisters if Mary was *always* a virgin?

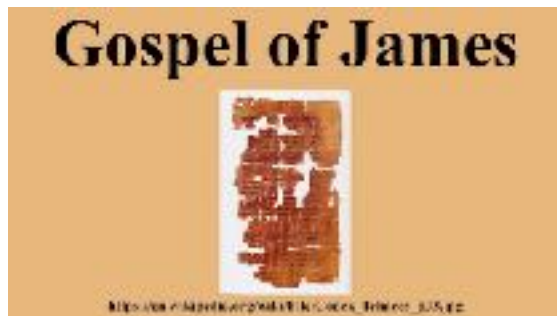
What I am getting at here is that like me, Jesus' followers realized that a lot is missing between Matthew's first chapter and the second chapter! And we are curious! We want to know more about how Jesus, the Savior, came to be, and there is so much that our gospels don't tell us.



How many of you remember the “Star Wars” series?¹ The first movie began with episode four entitled “A New Hope”. This movie introduced us to Luke Skywalker and his sister Leia. Yes, the series moved forward in time with “The Empire Strikes Back”. But the series also moved backwards with “Rogue One” when we learned about about Darth Vader, A.K.A. ‘Anikan’, Luke and Leia’s father, and how he turned to the ‘Dark Side’. Anyway, the point is the gospel according to James is a lot like “Star Wars”, in that this gospel moves back in time and narrates the history of Mary, the mother of Jesus, and how she met Joseph. But more than that, James’ gospel tells us about Mary’s

¹ Episode I: The Phantom Menace (1999), Episode II: Attack of the Clones (2002), Episode III: Revenge of the Sith (2005), Solo: A Star Wars Story (2018), Rogue One (2016), Episode IV: A New Hope (1977), Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back (1980), Episode VI: Return of the Jedi (1983), Episode VII: The Force Awakens (2015), Episode VIII: The Last Jedi (2017), Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker (2019).

parents, Anna and Joachim. From James' gospel we learn so much more about Jesus' background.



I encourage all of you to read James' gospel for yourself (I will attach it to this week's *eNews* or you can find it on-line). This morning, I can't possibly tell you all that it reveals. Nonetheless, I will share with you some highlights before I conclude with a devotion.



James' gospel can be divided into three.² In the first eight chapters, there is the story of Mary's own unique birth and childhood, wherein it is related that Anna, Mary's barren mother, became pregnant only after prayer to God.

² *The Complete Gospels*, Ronald Hock.



In the second eight chapters, the story continues with Mary being raised in Jerusalem's temple in a perfectly pure state. When Mary was old enough to menstruate, priests viewed her continued presence in the temple as a pollutant. The priests resolved the crisis by turning her over to a divinely chosen widower, the carpenter Joseph, who agreed to be her guardian, but refused to marry her. Joseph, being a widower, had children from his deceased wife and this explains how Jesus had (step) brothers and sisters. When Mary became pregnant by the Holy Spirit, a priest suspected Joseph and Mary had intercourse and put them to a test; both are poisoned. They failed to die and thus passed the test. In the last eight chapters, we hear of Jesus' birth as also told by Matthew and Luke, and the hiding of Jesus from Herod in a feeding trough.



Interestingly, James' gospel tells of a gynaecological exam in which one of the midwives physically examined Mary after she gave birth to Jesus and determined that, miraculously, she was still a virgin. Therefore, it is from James' extra-canonical gospel that the Catholic church sourced much of its 'tradition', particularly its beliefs about Mary and her virgin status and Immaculate Conception.

All of this is fascinating. Yet, let us conclude with what I feel is the most moving passage from James' gospel (I included as a meditation in your service order).



The passage is Anna's, Mary's mother, desperate and mournful lament to God to become pregnant: "Oh me, what am I like? I am not like the birds of the sky, for the birds of the sky are fruitful before you, Lord. Oh me, what am I like? I am not like the domestic animals, for the domestic animals are fruitful before you, Lord. Oh me, what am I like? I am not like the wild animals of the earth, for the wild animals of the earth are fruitful before you, Lord. Oh me, what am I like? I am not like these waters, for these waters are fruitful before you, Lord.

Oh me, what am I like? I am not like this earth, for the earth produces its fruit in season and blesses you, Lord.”

What I hear from Anna’s lament is not exclusively a plea to be pregnant, but rather a plea to understand God’s purpose for her.



Anna recognized the contentment birds and animals, creatures, found in doing that which God intended them to do. Anna extended creatures’ contentment to even water and the Earth, for they too foster and engender that which God intends. I hear in Anna’s agonizing prayer a deep desire to be fulfilled, to matter, to have a purpose in life. It is the universal craving that all of us have. We all pine to do that which God intends. Anna expressed all our yearnings to produce and yield that which God gave us to contribute. In short, Anna recognized that the inability to contribute to the Kingdom of God is agony for one’s soul. Anna recognized that a discovery of the role we have to foster the Kingdom of God brings peace and assurance.



Friends, in the season of COVID-19, if you find yourself depressed, isolated, unfulfilled, purposeless, and simply incomplete, I encourage you to pray to God that your purpose, your role, your contribution according to your gifts be revealed to you. By seeking and searching you will find.

I wonder if Anna's lament that contemplated the natural world provides us a hint on where to search for *our* purpose. She repeated over and over again the desire 'to be fruitful'. 'To be fruitful' is to provide. Birds provide nests and food for their young. Domestic animals provide eggs, milk, and labor for their caretakers. Wild creatures provide diversity and beauty to our planet. The water provides life and the earth bounty.



This week, let us individually pray for a clear understanding of that which we personally can *provide* the kingdom. And may we bring that fruit to the ministry of our beloved faith community at Centre Congregational Church.

This is the Word of God, and it was delivered to you at home, the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".