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Date: December 11, 2011
Sermon Title: What If There Was No Jesus?
Scripture: Matthew 2:1-8
Pastors: Rev. David Johnson Rowe

Matthew 2:1-8

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage.' When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born. They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'

I went to see the movie "Anonymous," the movie that proclaims that William Shakespeare most certainly did not write the plays of Shakespeare. Poor Shakespeare was just an illiterate drunken actor. A rich nobleman with a yen to write and a political agenda paid Shakespeare to pretend to be the author after Marlowe turned it down. Shakespeare just grew into the role, his greatest performance being to convince the world that he was a great playwright.

I prefer an older theory put forth by an Ivy League professor, that William Shakespeare wrote none of these plays, not one; but instead, they were written by another Englishman of the same name, William Shakespeare.

What sparked this sermon is a wonderful article in *The Boston Globe* called "Much Ado About Nothing." The author, columnist Alex Beam, noted the movement to debunk historical figures. He cited the "Anonymous" movie and a whole cottage industry to debunk Shakespeare; he cited an article in *The New Yorker* discrediting Homer as the author of the books of Homer; and he cited the decades-long debate to demythologize Jesus — everything from claiming that Jesus never said half the things the Bible says he said, to Jesus never was what people now say he was, to Jesus never was, period. Never lived. Never existed. (Beam, Alex. "Much Ado About Nothing." *The Boston Globe* 15 Nov. 2011. Print.)

I remember reading a book in seminary by Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest for the Historical Jesus*. This stuff was big in the 80s with two things called "The Jesus Seminar" and "The Jesus Project." One tried to zero in on what Jesus really said and didn't say; the other on whether Jesus really lived or didn't.

The Boston Globe columnist expressed his frustration with all this "foofaraw," he calls it, and "madness" by his column's title, "Much Ado About Nothing." The impact of Shakespeare is real impact. The impact of Homer is real impact. The impact of Jesus is real impact. Demythologize all you want, debunk all you want. You're still left with what Jesus means to you.

I'm not saying it's not interesting to dig deeper into the reality of Jesus or Shakespeare or King Arthur, or whether George Washington really did chop down a cheery tree. Even Christians have been trying to figure out the real Jesus. Christians spent almost four centuries battling — and I do mean battling — over whether Jesus was fully human, or fully divine, or half and half. Or, was Jesus divine, God, but while on earth he chose amnesia, he chose to forget, to not know that he was a God in order to fully experience humanity?

Then there is my favorite theory called "the adoption theory." That one says that Jesus was plain old 100 percent completely human, a regular guy, but he lived his life at such a level, with such goodness, even holiness, that God said, "Boy, if I ever had a son, I'd want him to be like that Jesus fellow," and so God "adopted" him.

These are all attempts to make sense of what doesn't make sense. The Virgin Birth doesn't make sense. Easter, the Resurrection, doesn't make sense. Dying on the cross for the forgiveness of sins doesn't make sense. Forgiving 70 times seven, walking on water, turning the other cheek, loving your enemies doesn't make sense. The Beatitudes don't make sense. God, coming down here, becoming one of us — we gave that up when we gave up

Roman mythology and Greek mythology. It doesn't make sense, so we demythologize, demystify, decertify.

Maybe Jesus was just a good guy, a Jewish carpenter, a gentle soul, wise beyond his years, a great teacher, a great philosopher, even a holy man, maybe even a healer. All in all, a pretty good package, God or not. Maybe you wonder what Jesus would think of all this wondering. Well, Jesus said, "If you have faith the size of a grain of mustard seed ... I can work with that!" (Matthew 17:20) In one exchange a man said to Jesus, "I believe ... help my unbelief." (Mark 9:24)

Jesus built his whole movement, his whole religion, with people who doubted him (St. Thomas), denied him (St. Peter), fought him (St. Paul), or just plain couldn't figure him out (all the disciples).

Jesus took people as they were and worked with them. There is an old saying, "It's O.K. if you don't believe in God; God believes in you." Recently, one of our really, really nice young men declared that he didn't believe in God ... but he loves his church! To me that's the beginning of faith, that's something I can work with, that's "help me with my unbelief," that's the "grain of mustard seed" Jesus was referring to. That's not the end of the conversation — that's the start.

On that very first Christmas, 2,000 years ago in a little town outside of Jerusalem, nobody had it all figured out. Not the Wise Men. Not the Shepherds. Not the Innkeeper. Not Mary and Joseph. But they knew they were part of something wonderful, and God could work with that. That's what we do in our church. We don't worry about demystifying Jesus, demythologizing or debunking Jesus. And we don't worry about those who do. We "keep it real," as the saying goes, and we bring the real Jesus into everyday life.

The Boston Globe article I mentioned includes an interview with a Boston pastor who said that he respects all that Biblical scholarship, all the wondering and questions and such. But day to day, people are spiritually hungry, spiritually thirsty, spiritually hurting, AND people are really hungry, really thirsty, really hurting. And it is the Christ of Christmas who dares us to change those lives, meet those needs. That's what it means to "keep Christ in Christmas."

It's fascinating to me that Christmas has become so acrimonious. "The war on Christmas," Fox News calls it. People are angry with a second-grade teacher who demythologized Santa. People are angry with the governor of Rhode Island for calling the big green fir tree at his State Capitol a "Holiday

tree." People promise to get in the face of any store clerk who dares to say "Happy Holidays" and boycott any store that uses "Happy Holidays" in promotions.

When I was a pastor up in the Berkshires, one local school or project got in trouble for making angels a part of the "holiday" exhibit. Another class got in trouble for having a "holiday party," at which cupcakes with red and green frosting (the colors of Christmas) were given to the Christian children, while cupcakes with blue and white frosting (the colors of the Israeli flag) were given to the Jewish children. There are places where Santa is in, candy canes are out; Frosty the Snowman is in, Christmas carols are out; reindeer are in, Wise Men are out. The whole thing is a mess, but even the mess is "much ado about nothing."

I must confess I don't understand the fuss. Faith is faith. Do we really need outside validation or popularity or merchandising or marketing for faith to work or for faith to be true?

I'm not looking for Macy's, the local schools, store clerks, or the Town Green to validate my Christmas. You and I are the only arbiters of how genuine our Christmas experience is. It's the Christmas in your home, the Christmas in our church, the Christmas in my heart and yours that determines how wonderful this Christmas is.

That's why years ago I stopped complaining about the "commercialization of Christmas." What do you think the purpose of commerce is? Why do we have commercials? To commercialize! We need to start counting on shopping malls and pizza parlors and grammar schools to do our job. Our job is Christmas. In here, in your home, in your heart, it's Christmas. This is where we decide who Jesus was, what Jesus was, and what we make of him.

Next Sunday, Christmas Sunday, we're going to hear some of the really terrific daily messages from this year's Advent Devotional. Today I'll close by using the very last one, by Fred Zarrilli. He was asked to reflect on Jesus's famous statement "Whatever you do for one of the least of these, the poorest of the poor, you do for me." Fred goes on to reflect all the various ways we can do unto Jesus by doing unto others. He likens it all to "praising God." The Bible says we should praise God with songs and voices and music and instruments. But what if that's not our thing? What if we don't play an instrument, don't like to sing, how do we praise God, then? Here is how Fred ends his devotion:

[You might say] "I don't even play an instrument!" To which God replies, "Ah, but you do, my friend, and I recently heard you playing it!"

"I heard you playing it when you volunteered to serve me dinner at Operation Hope, when you delivered food to me at Bridgeport Rescue Mission, when you supported me at ReFocus Outreach Ministry. I heard you playing it when you built me a front porch in Appalachia, when you traveled to see me in India with FOCI, when you taught me at Sunday School. I heard you playing it when you brought me dinner, when you donated your winter coat to me, when you visited me in the hospital. I heard you playing it when you smiled at me, when you forgave me, encouraged me, and when you prayed for me. I heard you playing it when ... well, let's just say I heard you playing it many times!"

Those are the sounds of Christmas. Those are the proof that the Jesus of Bethlehem, the Jesus of Nazareth, the Jesus of Jerusalem, the Jesus of Israel 2,000 years ago is the Jesus of Fairfield in 2011.

We're going to close our service with an old Easter hymn, but it's very appropriate for today. People wonder about the reality and relevance of Easter, just as people wonder about Christmas — can it be real, can it be true, can it make a difference for me? The hymn answers all that so beautifully:

"He Lives"

Alfred H. Ackley

*I serve a risen Savior; He's in the world today.
I know that He is living, whatever men may say.
I see His hand of mercy, I hear His voice of cheer,
And just the time I need Him He's always near.*

Chorus:

*He lives! He lives! Christ Jesus lives today!
He walks with me and talks with me along life's narrow way.
He lives! He lives! Salvation to impart!
You ask me how I know He lives? He lives within my heart.*

*In all the world around me I see His loving care,
And though my heart grows weary I never will despair.
I know that He is leading, thro' all the stormy blast;
The day of His appearing will come at last.*

*Rejoice, rejoice, O Christian! Lift up your voice and sing
Eternal hallelujahs to Jesus Christ, the King!
The Hope of all who seek Him, the Help of all who find,
None other is so loving, so good and kind.*