

Christmas Imagination

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Santa journeying across the sky from his North Pole resort is not the first flight of imagination forming part of our Christmas story. Already the first stories in Matthew and Luke give rein to fantasy and promise. Matthew employs their understanding of human reproduction to repeat a story that Mary was the rich soil in which the divine seed was sown, creates a pastiche of allusions to Israel's sojourn in Egypt and escape amid a tyrant's treachery to murder babies, and imagines a moving star making its own journey across the sky to hover above Bethlehem.



Luke invites us to remember David, Bethlehem's shepherd king, with shepherds in its fields and sounds of an angelic choir ringing out across Bethlehem's night sky. Matthew reflects the gospel's expansion beyond Israel, inviting us to join the astrologers from the east, who know the mysteries of that sky, and himself has David's name, whose letters make the number fourteen, appear to structure a genealogy made of thrice fourteen, but also six times seven, with Jesus beginning the perfect divine seventh.



Domitian

In Luke our invitation is to join the shepherds but also to listen to the echoes of Rome's proud boast to be good news to the world, bringing it peace, through its divine emperors and sons of God. Like the pictures inside Luke's front door, Luke's nativity turns the pretentiousness of the politics of his day upside down to give voice to the aspirations of Israel's and world's poor who cried out for change and still do. A baby in the stable's feeder box is Luke's fantasy's connection with the reality of half a century before: a cross at the end of a daring assertion of God's generosity and the call to convert from injustice and discrimination. And in his own way Matthew has Herod's intent foreshadow that event.

Most of this is faith's imagination, fantasies to convey fact, human adulation which typically so often acclaims the messenger over the message, but that is not lost or not entirely. Fantasy has inspired fantasy, from a cross to a cradle, from astrologers to St Nicholas, from a star's journey to a reindeer drawn sleigh. The true test of authenticity is whose good news survives, whose voices are heard or left unheard, whose politics are served or challenged, and what compassion flows.