

Pastor's Point

"The sense of being shaken up is Advent good news. Christmas should be more than putting up the tree and wrapping the presents. It should give birth to something that shakes up the routine, something that gets us to see the world otherwise. That shaking up is what it means to follow Jesus."

*Amy-Jill Levine; Light of the World: A Beginners Guide to Advent
p. 34*

Christmas talk is almost never about change. In fact, Christmas is one of the holidays whose practices are etched in stone, the ones we like to change least. We tend to host or attend the same events at the same places every year. We cook the same foods and use the same decorations in the exact same ways. We lean into tradition and nostalgia, holding on for all we're worth to believing that this is the one thing that shouldn't change, the one thing that is changed will lead to the fall of everything. What can you count on in this world if not family traditions at Christmas time?

In her book, *Light of the World: A Beginner's Guide to Advent*, Bible scholar Amy-Jill Levine provides both history and perspective to the birth narratives in both Matthew and Luke. She takes us on a deep dive into the Jewish histories from which these narratives arise, helping us to understand how 1st century Jewish cultural practices fit into the Christmas stories. This deep dive makes these stories richer and more meaningful than they could possibly be devoid of context. "Bad history makes bad theology," opines Levine and I'm inclined to agree with her.

Reading only the surface of the stories lulls us into a false sense of comfort, assuring us that we know this one, we know how it goes and what it means. Stirring the first two chapters of Matthew and Luke together makes for an orderly Christmas pageant, but fails to challenge us to find something new, something life-altering going on in the act of preparation. Each gospel writer structures the story in a specific way for a specific reason. They are drawing comparisons between the old stories and the new in order to challenge us to hear them in new ways. The waiting we do through the season of Advent is not merely a time to lean into tradition, it should also be a time to prepare to have our world rocked, our lives changed. Mathew and Luke are trying to tell us how Jesus' birth changed the world, how it calls us to do the same. I invite you to spend some time with both narratives this Advent, to think about how Matthew differs from Luke and why, to consider what preparing for a whole new world means. And, if you're so inclined, check out Ms. Levine's book for some guidance along the way.

Blessings,



PS: <https://www.cokesbury.com/9781501884306-Light-of-the-World-DVD> offers up the entire first vides study session (about 10 minutes) for free.