

Advent 4 A
Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:18-25
December 23, 2007

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Notes not for publication

If there's a word that sums up the readings for today, this fourth Sunday of Advent, it's the word, *scandal*. It's hard for us to think of Christmas as scandalous—it seems good and pure and shiny, the way we've learned to read the Biblical story. But the fact is, the coming of God in the person of Christ is a scandalous event. When we peel off that part of Christmas, when we clean it up and make it all sweet and good, we risk missing the coming of Christ to us. It seems that God believes we're not going to get the message if it comes straight up.

We find scandal first in the reading from the prophet Isaiah, where King Ahaz is trembling in his boots. He's worried about a possible hostile takeover of his kingdom, and in fact that was exactly what was about to happen. God's people had fooled around as a nation; they had ignored their responsibilities to God and especially to one another, and that note was about to come due. They indeed were overthrown, and they were sent into exile. All of that was yet to come when Isaiah spoke to Ahaz here in the seventh chapter, and surely at that point the king would have liked some kind of sign from God. It would have been a comfort to him to if God had said, don't worry, I'll take care of you; it's going to be OK. But Ahaz so far hadn't been one to take much stock in the promises of God.

So when Isaiah tells the king to ask for a sign, the king says, "Oh, no, I don't think so." And Isaiah says, "Oh, yeah? Well, I'm giving you one anyway. You're afraid

of these other nations threatening to whoop up on you? Well here's God's sign for you: a baby." Now, I don't know, but that doesn't seem to me like it would be too much comfort. A baby? Not maybe a whole bunch of extra soldiers or weapons or money? Wouldn't those be more helpful in this case? Instead the people were supposed to take their comfort and hope from a baby, first conceived, then growing in his mother's body, being born and growing some more. This sign was going to take time to be of any help or any effect, and in any case it certainly wasn't the kind of help Ahaz was looking for. If not exactly scandalous, this promise seemed at least irrelevant and nonsensical.

Let's move to the gospel text, and let's look at the verses preceding today's reading. Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogical list, the kind we typically like to skip over—Methuselah begat Jehosaphat, etcetera—boring. But this genealogy is actually very important. First, it places Jesus in the line of King David through Joseph, since he would inherit his bloodline from his legal father. And that meant Jesus fit the profile of an anointed king or messiah coming out of the house of David. But if we look more closely, we'll also see that along with all the men in the list, who would normally be the only ones named, we also find the names of five women: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, Bathsheba (the wife of Uriah), and Mary.

You may not know the stories of these women, but suffice it to say that they did not fall into the pattern of good Hebrew girls one would expect in the lineage of a king. Except for Mary, they were not Jews at all, but Gentiles. Each was known for some sort of sexual impropriety or irregularity, or as one writer described them, a "[a] hooker for a day, [a] prostitute, [a] foreigner, [an] adulteress, [and an] unwed mother" (Kristen M.

Swenson, "Holy Mothers of God," theolog.org, 12/19/07). Each also showed amazing independence and initiative, as well as steadfast faith in God. And here they are, these scandalous foremothers, lifted up here for all to see, instead of hidden from public view. It's not enough that Jesus was born of such women; it's important to this gospel that we know up front this is where he comes from. It sets the stage for his life and ministry and gives shape to his identity. Outside the lines, offensive to the decent and upright—this is who Jesus has been since before he was even born.

And then, of course, there's the story of the birth itself. We know there's scandal there too, we've heard it before. But it's easy to miss the impact of this as well, especially given how sparse the text is here in Matthew. "When Mary and Joseph were engaged, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit." The language is so passive, so clinical, almost. Found to be with child? Can you imagine what that scene must have looked like? Found by whom, and how? I'm imagining her mother wailing, her father yelling, her siblings ducking and hiding.

There's quite a story in these few verses, the details of which we do not know but can imagine. There's a Baptist preacher in San Antonio who has done just that—his name is Gordon Atkinson, and he's taken the scriptures about Jesus' birth and expanded them into a book called, *A Christmas Story You Never Heard*. (He's actually also recorded it on CD, which I have and would be glad to loan out.)

The story begins with Joseph in his workshop, and we find that his friends have all pulled away from him. His friend, Isaac, drops by the shop and says, "Joseph, you know I love you like a brother. ... But why are you getting mixed up with that girl? We

both know the child isn't yours. She has betrayed you, and no one even knows who the father is. You're an honest man and well respected. You could have any girl in town. Why do you care so much about...her and her worthless child?" Joseph interrupts angrily and makes it clear that this child will be his, that he has his reasons.

Isaac, the story continues, replies, "Hey, Joseph, it's your life. Do what you think is right. But no one trusts that Mary girl. I'm sorry, but that's the truth. Everyone likes you—you know—but do whatever you need to do, I guess." Then Isaac added, "It's going to be hard on Mary when you're in Bethlehem for the census, that's all I'm saying. People in a small town can be cruel. Are cruel. I heard that her parents were going to send her away, ...until you agreed to marry her. With you gone, I don't know. It's something to think about, whether or not you want to get mixed up in a situation like that." (Atkinson, *ACSYNH*, pp. 10, 13-15).

Did you ever wonder how Joseph and Mary could have ended up wandering around Bethlehem, when it was supposedly his hometown? Wouldn't he have had family there? Well, the story goes, before Joseph could get there and give them his spin, the family had heard all the Nazareth gossip from a traveler passing through town. They were appalled at what they heard and would not even let the young couple in the front door of the house. (*ibid.* p. 37-38). So it was that they found themselves on the street, Mary in labor, with no place to lay their heads. It must have been terrifying. Can this really be the sign the whole world awaits? An illegitimate child born in somebody's garage to an unmarried teenager?

I've thought about what this might mean, what it is God is trying to say to us in

the way this birth comes about. And it seems to me the point lies in the scandal and in the things we cling to for security—knowing the right way, and lining ourselves up with it. It's at the point where our rightness rubs up against the shame that surrounds both Christ's birth and his death that God seeks to encounter us. In the words of one writer, this story "asks us to find... something that scandalizes even us, as it scandalized Joseph. Where in this narrative, where in the Incarnation do we find the place that makes us say, "No, wait, I can go this far, but no further. If you ask this, I cannot continue to walk with you." Where is the place in the story where we fall away? Where we put Jesus quietly away [as Joseph was going to do with Mary], not wishing to shame him, but not wishing to associate with him, either?" (preachingpeace.org, Advent 4 A).

It's a hard question, and it's one we frankly find it easy to avoid, being so far removed from the story itself. But if Christ were to be born today, in our town, to someone we know, what might it look like? What kind of people would the couple be? How would they show up here, and what would they ask us for? There can be different answers to that question, but the important thing to ask ourselves is, what human being or situation would offend me most, and can I imagine Christ coming in that way? And when we find that spot, that point of friction, are we open to hearing a new thing? Do we just already know what we know about the world, and that's the end of it? Or is there a place in us that is reachable, willing to lay down all our justifications and defenses, to connect with weakness and vulnerability?

We, like King Ahaz, would like a sign from God, but we would prefer one that

confirms what we already are aiming for, a sign that promises to protect our world as we have crafted it. We want to know that we've got it under control, that strength and success will finally be ours, as people, as a church. That's the word we'd like from God, but instead this story starts with angels appearing to people and scaring them to death—"Do not be afraid," they say, this whole thing is out of your control. God's got it covered—you just follow along. We have all these women who have slept around and done bad things, and they have led to this baby, and no one knows who the father is, and oh, by the way, all of that will turn out to be the salvation of the world.

I don't know about you, but this is not how I would have written the story of the salvation of the world. At first glance, this does not seem to be a satisfactory answer to our trouble. The world continues at war, and children continue without food and clean water and medical care and stable adults in their lives. Here at home, a bunch of us are walking around with holes left in us where our loved ones used to be. Some of these wounds are very fresh, just in the last few days and weeks. Others have big secrets they feel they have to hide, from co-workers, from a spouse, truth about us we want no one to hear, especially at Christmas time. It's a tough place, this world.

Our instinct is to try to pull ourselves out of this, to build really good walls and straighten the place up the best we can. But the word of the Lord today says that God is coming to us as we are at our worst, into our pain, our vulnerability and shame. God is not just sending a sign; God is becoming the sign, in the flesh, incarnate, God with us. We will fight God for not having come the way we wanted, for bringing all this scandal and mess and implying that we're somehow related to it. But hear today that

we can trust this baby. We can trust his mama and his daddy. They don't look like much, but then neither do we, when we look in the mirror honestly. Yet they risked all things, because they believed that in the tiny form of Christ Jesus, God is coming to claim every bit of us. So hold nothing back; let it all go, give it all up, and give thanks too. The baby is coming to save us.

“Isaiah 7:10-16

7:10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying,

7:11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.

7:12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.

7:13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?"

7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

7:15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

7:16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Psalms 80:1-7

80:1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth

80:2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us!

80:3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

80:4 O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?

80:5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure.

80:6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves.

80:7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Matthew 1:18-25

1:18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

1:19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

1:20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

1:21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

1:22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

1:23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

1:24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

1:25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.