

December 22, 2019
4 Advent, Year A
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Christ Church Exeter

A Convincing God

We turn the corner this morning from waiting to hear the story to beginning to tell the story of the birth of Christ – with Christmas only a few days away. There is much to do.

You might recall that of the four gospels, only Matthew and Luke tell the story of the birth of Jesus. And what Matthew's gospels reminds us this morning is that the whole story began with scandal. (Matthew 1:18-25) "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. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly." Public disgrace. A quiet dismissal.

Scandal of course has no bounds of history, place or culture. We know how it sells newspapers, fills the airways of talk radio and floods social media. A scandal or controversy can be real, contrived, exaggerated or denied. No one person is immune from its power to generate gossip, sway opinions, strain friendships and even ruin lives. Scandals can emerge from and impact the family, the church, the government, the military, cooperate America and Hollywood. We often call those scandals in families "skeletons in the closet" and they are more common that we would like to admit. Recently there has been a sweeping piece of journalism that has exposed all kinds of wasteful spending and untruths of what was going on in Afghanistan – this nation's longest war – making many see echoes of Viet Nam. With so many scandals vying for attention, I would venture to say that many people are just trying to get through their day.

What do people do when scandal surfaces? Some go underground for a while – keep their heads low -- until the news and shock passes. Others get more assertive and out there: more public figures even hire P.R. firms and fixers to advise them out of crises.

My objective this morning is for us to connect what we see all too often in our public and private lives with how the story of birth of Jesus is foretold in the gospels. The Greatest Story Ever Told began with an undeniable scandal.

Our focus today is on Joseph, the husband of Mary. Father's Day may well be the third Sunday in June, but on the 4th Sunday of Advent it is Joseph in the spotlight.

The story Matthew's gospel tells rests on his reaction and response. What is he going to do about the news of Mary's unconventional if not divine conception? Remember the couple were engaged, not yet married, which implied that public promises to care for Mary were made by Joseph. And then, Mary was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

We can naturally imagine the shame, the disbelief, the embarrassment he must have felt. In an ancient culture of strict rules and small-town intensive morality, any news of this surprising pregnancy could hardly be good news. Yet Joseph is portrayed as a classic good guy: he is righteous and does not want to expose Mary to public disgrace. A quick divorce/dismissal would be a better option.

We see how Joseph may have been good, but he was not yet a saint. As commentator Celeste Kennel-Shank puts it (Christian Century December 4, 2019) “Any way you shake it out, Joseph does not believe Mary. It takes an angel of the Lord to command him not to dismiss her. God convinces Joseph to believe Mary. He wasn’t inclined to do it on his own.”

Yet the angel of the Lord appeared just when Joseph had made up his mind. “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. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus.”

Joseph’s plight is easily relatable to me. He, along with Peter, are characters that I can imagine being real people. Impulsive. Not certain. Risk averse. Human. For those of us who thought that our mind was made up about something we believe in all our heart – and then something happens, someone intervenes and allows us to take a second look and offer a different outcome. Minds can be changed. Fixed positions and long held views can move.

Often times when it comes to faith and believing, I too need convincing. I need to be convinced that these ancient words we read each Sunday can help direct and shape my life today. I need to be convinced at times that people are born innately good and blessed even when and if they do bad and horrible things. I need to be convinced that we have the agency, the power, to shape our future in ways that can heal divisions, that we can work together and cooperate with others to solve pressing problems that impact us all, that we can reconcile with one-time adversaries and enemies. When life gets heavy, I too need convincing that God’s power and light are stronger than the pull and force of darkness and evil – that all will be well in the universe. That the God I worship is the One behind it all.

How did God’s messenger – the angel – convince Joseph? The angel said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife.”

“Do not be afraid” we hear again and again from God, through God’s angels and from the mouth of Jesus. We hear it enough that we may just start believing it can be true. God convinces us to believe and trust by letting us know that fear and doubt are real. When we hear in sermons that God meets us where we are, this is what the means. The angel did not castigate or lecture or judge Joseph – “who do you think you are to reject Mary?” -- the angel simply said what was true and what was about to unfold. You will name this son Jesus and he will save people from their sins.

This is how God convinces us. God speaks truth that stands up to false idols and empty promises. God is with us from the beginning to the very end.

Former Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams – one of the Anglican world’s greatest theologians -- commented in his Christmas message years ago about the verse in the Letter to the Hebrews that reads: (11:16) God “is not ashamed to be called their God.” Williams goes on to write: “when God’s people have been faithful to God, faithful in keeping on moving onwards in faith rather than settling down in self-satisfaction, when they are truly pilgrims, then God is content to be known as their God. This verse from Hebrews is God’s way of reassuring us that, in spite of everything, God doesn’t mind being seen in our company. God is not embarrassed by human company. God shows that he is not ashamed to be with us.”

It seems like such an odd thing to say, doesn’t it? God is not ashamed or embarrassed of us. How could that be if God made us?

To me, what it can mean, is that God knows that we, like Joseph, need some help sometimes. We need some convincing when paralyzed by fear and doubt. That praying for another person makes a difference. We discover that difference if we ask the person prayed for. They will often say: I just felt better. More at peace. Less anxious. Less alone. More loved. Held and comforted. Prayer connects us in a web of relationships reminding us that we are not alone.

We may need convincing that one person can make a difference in a world full of hurt and need. That we don’t have to go very far to see need.

We may need convincing that God enters into our lives often when it might feel like we are weakest and most discouraged.

We may need convincing that going to church and connecting with a worshipping committee is a needed touchstone for our souls. That being generous with what we have been given and have earned through our work, can be used for the greater good when a portion is shared with others.

Finally, we may need convincing that God’s angels continue to speak to us when we are asleep and when we are awake.

Be ready. Prepare a space in your heart to hear the story again with open minds and fresh eyes: Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way...