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CLEANING UP THE MESS

When I was a child, visiting my grandparent's farm in Henryetta, Oklahoma, my grandfather decided to conspire with my father to create a Christmas Eve memory for all the kids. In the middle of the night, they went up on the roof of the house and started stomping around. My father, on cue, yelled through an open window that Santa Claus must be here. I sat up in bed started, as did my sister and brother, only to hear that, yes indeed, there were noises coming from the rooftop, and a cry of "Ho, ho, ho!" that sounded suspiciously like my grandfather, but I wanted so badly to believe was the Jolly Old Man himself.

The next morning, the adults were sworn to secrecy as the kids all grilled them about the midnight commotion. We ask again and again if they had heard the noises on the roof. They claimed to have heard nothing. But upon entering the living room and finding our stockings newly stuffed with oranges and pencils and socks, we made a silent pact that we would not be the ones to challenge the myth—our complicity was needed, lest the whole Christmas thing collapse around us. In our silence, we agreed to believe the unbelievable.

Looking back, there was something both wonderful and cruel about that prank. And I thought of it this week when I turned to this familiar text of the story of the birth of Jesus. When in doubt, be emphatically implausible. Begin by saying, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." Sounds oddly like my father yelling through the window.

Don't you think it's strange to begin the story of the birth of a man this shrouded in mystery and scandal by speaking in the declarative mode? Kids, this is how it happened! What this tells me is that there are still arguments circulating outside the early church, and maybe even inside it, about who Jesus

really was, where he really came from, where he really went, and what evidence this fledgling movement could really provide that he was indeed the long-awaited messiah. And perhaps most troubling of all was the simple question: And where is he now?

As I have mentioned from this pulpit before, I think that even as late as the eighth or ninth decade of the first century, when the writer of Matthew's gospel put his pen to the scroll, John was still casting the biggest shadow. His father was royalty, remember? Zechariah, which was to have been John's name until Elizabeth insisted on John and Zechariah agreed by writing J-O-H-N on a tablet because he had been struck mute by an angel as punishment for refusing to believe that his old and barren wife would become pregnant and that his son, which he was not to name Zechariah Jr., but John, would never touch wine or strong drink, and would be a great preacher and would prepare the way of the Lord — all of which might be a bit hard for an old man to swallow. So the angel just shuts him up. A man who can't talk? Maybe Matthew was written by a woman!

John, not Zechariah Jr., then grows up to become the Billy Graham of his day, without the good suit, and, after scaring lots of sinners to death out in the desert, he is finally thrown in prison, and dies sticking it to a king after a dancing girl asks for his head on a plate. Now, this is good stuff. If you lived in those days, which character would you make the mini-series about? John or Jesus?

Because the first question anyone in those days would ask about any notable person is, "Who is the father?" What is the blood line? Does he come from the House of David? And how did the first Jesus People answer that question? God is his father? Well he referred to him as "Abba" an intimate term best translated by the English word "papa." And his mother was a virgin. How do you know that? Well, sometime after midnight, an angel shouted it through the window, and the next morning, nobody asked any hard questions, seeing that indeed their stockings had been filled with good news, and all the grownups seemed sworn to secrecy, so we decided to play along.

Have you noticed how hard it is to be a critical thinker around Christmas time? Our whole society, not just church folk, is asked to enter into these myths of adoration without asking too many questions. The infancy narratives of Jesus are a lot like those noises coming from the roof of my grandparent's farm. They are the metaphors of mystery. They are not the work of journalists. None of us kids made a plan to return the following year with a camera rigged up on the roof with a motion detector that would switch on a flood light and snap a picture and solve this matter once and for all. But Matthew is giving it

his best shot, mind you, “Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way.” Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

Before they lived together? Now there’s a great example of how language changes. Living together meant after you married in those days, even though today most people live together before they get married. Today we might begin the story, “Lo, before they married, but even as they were yet living together, Mary was found to be with child. It happens.” Stuff happens. Indeed it does.

Can’t you see this is Matthew’s best shot at covering a scandal? With his pen he means to rig up a camera on the roof and prove once and for all that there are answers to all these hard questions. So he begins his gospel with a genealogy — to answer the question about bloodline of course. The messiah must come from the House of David. But what good on earth is a genealogy if his father is God?

So we get to the end of it, with so and so begetting so and so and so who begets so and so, and then it ends, not with “and Joseph fathered Jesus.” But instead with, “Joseph the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born.” Nice save. But there’s a small problem. If the gene pool ends with Joseph (having been rather divinely trumped by, well, God)—then all the genes that went into making up Joseph mean nothing!

If God is the Father of Jesus, biologically speaking, then the whole blood line argument becomes meaningless, a non-sequitur (Latin for “it does not follow”). In the beginning was God, so God has no genealogy. You wouldn’t dare to ask God, “Who is your father, or your father’s father?” Of course not. He is same yesterday, today, and tomorrow.

Matthew is trying his best to cover a scandal here — our faith was born in scandal. You and me and every other man, woman, and child on this planet who is a Christian, and every man, woman and child who ever was a Christian — we are all the children of a scandal. Which scandalizes some people but absolutely thrills me (which I will come back to in a moment).

For now, just let yourself feel the weight of Matthew’s words, to feel how hard he is trying to answer these questions that won’t go away from all the skeptics who see these Jesus people making this audacious claim that in Jesus God has come among us, that he is Immanuel, “God with us.” And they say, “Prove it.” And since it’s not the kind of thing that can be proved, Matthew is destined to fall short, and even open himself to ridicule.

First of all, since nobody stands outside of a maternity ward waiting for a famous person to be born, all our tales about famous people are retroactive. The truth is, nobody knows under what circumstances Mary got pregnant, and nobody knows who the father of Jesus really was. Now how's that for a scandal? We have a name for children born to unknown fathers, don't we? — but it's not a name that even the most irreverent preacher I know would dare to use from the pulpit.

Now let's consider the pickle that Joseph is in. Since he does not know the cause of her pregnancy, he fears she has been unfaithful. In those days, betrothal was equivalent to marriage, so infidelity during betrothal was considered adultery. The marriage was completed when the groom took his betrothed to his own home. In the interval she remained in her father's house, and sexual intercourse was not permitted. But she's pregnant, so how did it happen?

Remember, the earliest New Testament writing we have are the authentic letters of Paul, from perhaps a few years after the death of Jesus to the mid-fifties of the first century. And he has no birth story to tell, only a resurrection story. Then the first gospel is written, which we call Mark, probably in 70 C.E., or four decades after the execution of Jesus, and it has no birth story. Jesus appears in the Jordan River as a grown man to begin his public ministry.

It is not until late in the first century (80 or 90 C.E.) that Matthew, and then Luke add the miraculous infancy narratives that we love at Christmas time. Scholars believe that as the early church formed and then floundered, and Jesus did not return as expected, the pressure grew for a written record to tell the Jesus story. Enter the gospel, written no doubt by Greek-speaking scribal elites who were converts to the Jesus Movement, because the original disciples were illiterate, Aramaic speaking day-laborers. They couldn't write a gospel if their life depended on it.

During this period, the gospel writers must have gone into the synagogues to search the Hebrew scripture for signs that predicted the coming of the Messiah, and then knitted these proofs into the fabric of their gospels. Matthew in particular, which is the most Jewish gospel of all, is fond of saying, "All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken" by the prophet so and so— which is to convince Jews that their own prophets knew Jesus was coming, even though many of them were apparently asleep when it happened.

But this very effort to "prove" that Jesus had been predicted by the prophets led the later church to make one of the most disturbing and debated mistakes ever recorded in the Bible. Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, and we read

this in English as “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel.” That must be Jesus, right, since Mary was a virgin? But, to quote that famous line from the movie Apollo 13, “Houston, we have a problem.”

The Hebrew word used by Isaiah was Almah, which means a young woman, either married or unmarried—not a woman who has never had sex. When Isaiah was translated into Greek in Alexandria, the Jewish translators chose the word, parthenos, which means “virgin” — as in a woman who has never had sex. The King James Version of the Bible picked up this mistranslation and we have assumed ever since that Isaiah was predicting that a virgin, not merely a young woman, would be the mother of the savior of Israel.

Now you may be wondering just now if I am trying to steal the Christmas story from you, Grinch like, using my Jesus Seminar weapons of mass-textual destruction. And the answer is no - I’m trying to give the story back to you as a metaphor, as Matthew and Luke’s well-intentioned stomping around on the roof, and shouting, in the words of that popular Christmas song, “Do You Hear What I Hear?” Do you know this song?

Said the night wind to the little lamb

Do you see what I see?

‘Way up in the sky, little lamb

Do you see what I see?

A star, a star

Dancing in the night

With a tail as big as a kite

Said the little lamb to the shepherd boy

Do you hear what I hear? . . .

A song, a song, high above the tree

With a voice as big as the sea.

Said the shepherd boy to the mighty king

Do you know what I know . . .

A Child, a Child,

Shivers in the cold

Let us bring Him silver and gold . . .

The Child, the Child

Sleeping in the night

He will bring us goodness and light

He will bring us goodness and light

That song, written in October, 1962 at the height of the Cuban missile crisis by a married couple that nobody has ever heard of, Noel Regney and

Gloria Shayne Baker, was composed by Noel after he watched babies being pushed in strollers on the sidewalks of New York City--while the world held its breath in that October nuclear showdown. Although it has been performed countless times and made into a world-wide hit by Bing Crosby, it was originally a plea to stop the madness by contemplating another story — one that can only be told by poets. Do you see what I see? Do you hear what I what I hear? Do you know what I know? A child, a child, shivers in the cold. Let us bring him silver and gold.

The composer of that song confessed to being unable to sing it, because each time he was asked to do so, he and his wife were overcome with emotion. I understand that. When I hear Christmas carols, even in the mall and in the midst of the madness of the Christmas season, I am overcome with emotion — because the true meaning of Christmas can only be told by the poets.

Two of them wrote the gospels of Matthew and Luke, and at their time, and in their way, and for their audience, they used poetry to explain the mystery of a man born in obscurity who would become what they believed was the savior of the world. How else could they do it, except to speak of angels and shepherds and wise men (whom I like to think as university professors) drawn to a wisdom even deeper than their dissertations and to a security even more permanent than tenure?

How else could they redeem this scandal except by creating a narrative in which a young girl, perhaps 13 or 14 years old, could consider herself the “handmaiden of the Lord” and sing a song like the Magnificat? And what about Joseph, perhaps the most overlooked character in this story in my opinion, who trusts in what he does not understand, and thinks not of himself, but of a young girl whose life he has the power to ruin just by following the law, but whose future, and whose child he helped to redeem. He is told in a dream to “Let it be” and he does. Here is a man who is not a control freak (now that’s a miracle).

We forget that the siren song of Christmas is not a call to believe; it’s a call to trust. We might be better off in the church if we used the word, “trust” in place of the word faith, more often. Because faith has become about what we believe, and what we believe does not have the power to save us. Conservatives mistake certainty for faith and Liberals mistake knowledge for redemption. Both fall short because neither one requires trust.

Trust is what makes all human relationships possible, and that’s why lying is what undoes the world. It undoes trust and trust holds the universe together. Jesus Followers are not people who possess certain knowledge about

who is saved and who is lost; neither are we hyper-intellectuals know-it-alls who condemn the simple-minded and forget that to do so is to be simple-minded.

We are a community that trusts in the power of love and compassion to redeem a broken world. We believe in patience, not as a doctrine, but as a practice. We believe in forgiveness, not as a cosmic bargain with individual benefits, but as a practice. And most of all, we believe in unconditional love, not as a creed to be mouthed in church and then forgotten, but as the ultimate spiritual practice—taking us where we could otherwise never go—into the white-hot center of the heart of God. A God who can be trusted to redeem even the likes of us.

How do we know this? We don't. We don't know anything. Because when you think you know that is when you do not know. But when you know that you do not know, that is when you know. Or, to put it another way, that is when you trust.

I don't know about you, but for me the strangest spectacle of all around the holidays is watching people try to have "the perfect Christmas." Where did they get that idea? Well, from the jewelers and the car-salesmen, and the saccharine preachers, of course. But not from the Bible. In the Bible, there is no Christmas, per se. There is scandal and brokenness; there is terror and tenderness; there is sex, and lies, but no video tape. There is a frightened girl who is powerless and a gentle and patient man who doesn't get his feelings hurt. There are kings who are deluded, and peasants who are empowered, and the spirits of children leaping in the womb and swirling over all of it there are angels—the only thing the poets know to call that stubborn, impossible, transformative power we call trust. So the only "perfect" Christmas I can imagine would be to find, not under the tree or even in your stocking, but deep in your heart, the gift that is trust – trust in the power of God to redeem all our imperfection.

Have yourself a messy little Christmas.

Amen.

