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December 19, 2010
Matthew 1:18-25

THE REMAINS OF A SCANDAL

It seemed like a fine idea at the time. Finals were over after a particularly challenging semester and I had a few days off with the need to unplug, so I headed for the mountains and a welcome few days to immerse myself in the solace of nature. To be honest, this was my first time to go hiking by myself, at least overnight. And, looking back on it now, I was just as careless and foolish as probably every other 20 year old guy who thinks that he is pretty much invulnerable.

It wasn't until that night on the side of one of the Three Sisters Mountains in central Oregon that I realized how careless I had been. It was a cool, moonless night and I was far from any town or parking lot that would provide even a meager source of light. I didn't want to go to the trouble of building a fire since it wasn't that cold, so I hadn't bothered to gather wood or tinder. I got out a book and fired up my small, propane powered camp lantern. About 30 minutes into my reading, the lantern started to dim. 10 minutes later it was out and it was then that I realized that I had not brought spare fuel with me. I hadn't checked the lantern in the first place, nor had I replaced the spare fuel canister that I used on the last trip.

It was dark. And soon it was really, really dark. I can remember thinking that it was not possible for it to be so dark. It was the kind of dark that surrounded you...dripping over me like a giant pool of ink. With nothing to do, I climbed into my tent (thank goodness I had at least planned well enough to set that up before sundown) and waited for the morning. Of course it was even darker in there. Oh, I had a little Bic lighter, but against a blanket of thick darkness that isn't much comfort. That was one of the longest nights I have ever spent. I have never been so happy to see a sunrise in my life.

In their book, [The First Christmas](#), Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan talk

about how the stories of the first Christmas are resplendent with light. In Matthew, the star of Bethlehem blazes in the night, leading the wise men to the birthplace of Jesus. In Luke, the night is filled with light and the glory of God, as angels bring the news of Jesus' birth to the shepherds in the fields. Light, Borg and Crossan say, is an ancient archetypal symbol. Long before we learned to domesticate darkness with artificial light, the night time and the approach of darkness was a thing to be feared. We can't see when it is that dark and we stumble around. We don't know what is out there and, just like my night out on the mountain, sounds amplify themselves and grow from croaking frogs into cougars on the prowl for a midnight snack.

Try it sometime. Even in the light-polluted city, you can still turn off all of the lights in the house (you might be surprised how hard that is) and sit in as much darkness as you can produce. It is a sobering experience. First because you realize that now we have to manufacture darkness the way that we used to have to fabricate light. It is rare for us to be in total darkness...even our bedrooms at night glow with green alarm clocks or the intrusion of street lights through the curtains. But what you also might realize in your quest for darkness is that somehow having no light makes things quieter...I'm not sure how that works...and makes you hyper vigilant of your surroundings. You hear things you didn't before even though it is your sight that is now limited. I think those are the remains of our once essential survival techniques that kicked in when darkness fell. Old habits die hard.

It is remarkable then, that Jesus' birthday takes place right around the time of the Winter Solstice, the longest night of the year...the time when the most darkness literally surrounds us. Of course, this is not the historically accurate story. We have no idea when Jesus was actually born, but after a lot of wrangling and a variety of times and dates celebrated, in 350 BCE, Pope Julius declared December 25th as the official date - integrating it with a Roman winter solstice festival celebrating, interestingly enough, the "Birthday of the Unconquered Sun" (S—U—N) forever linking the theme of light conquering darkness with the story of the birth of Jesus.

It makes sense to place the parabolic story within an historical event, so that the darkness that resides outside gets a part in our story of the arrival of the Christ child - a metaphorical tale that is meant to convey something sacred, not something contained within the realm of history. It is the symbolic defeat of darkness by light that the birth of Jesus represents to us as Christians, which is why by the time John gets around to writing his gospel, the birth story is very different. "In the beginning", John says, "was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God...what has come into being in it was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

If you'll pardon the pun, John was merely reflecting the great wealth of light and darkness imagery from the Hebrew tradition - one of the reasons that there is

still a festival of lights called Hanukkah. As so many ancient cultures did, the Judeans learned to equate light with life and they also attached darkness to death. It is no wonder that they saw the dawn as the inbreaking of new life, and that the spring equinox brought the promise of lighter, easier and brighter days...the end of the dark and cold of winter. In this sense, Christmas is a plea for us to shift from darkness to light, from raw survival techniques to a new way of living in the world.

In Genesis, the very first thing that God creates to stand against the chaos of darkness is light, which God pronounces as "very good". God comes to Moses in the light of a burning bush and to the slaves being lead out of Egypt as a pillar of fire in the night. Isaiah uses this same imagery to discuss the ways that God interacts with the world when he announces, "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them a light has shined." And later he tells the nation Israel to "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." Everywhere light marks the coming of God's presence and promise.

And that is what Advent has been dealing with. In the midst of understood perhaps metaphorical darkness the promises have been delivered, the coming of war into peace, swords into plowshares, darkness into light is reaching its apex. We've been looking forward, not backward, in this season of anticipation, and today's reading brings us to the long-awaited moment of God's dramatic "new thing," God's fresh, new act in the drama of salvation - the hope of moving past mere survival and into real life.

Into this narrative drops the story of Jesus, though we have different versions. Mark apparently didn't think his birth to be all that important, he has no account of it at all. But Matthew and Luke fill in that gap. For Luke, Mary is the star of the story and Joseph a bit player at best. Look at your nativity scenes, they're based on Luke. You place the little Joseph statue behind Mary, usually outside of the stable where the toy sheep and donkeys are...just barely in front of the wise men. In Matthew, however, the story centers on Joseph. One could certainly claim this as an example of the very patriarchal culture this story comes from, where women were secondary characters anyway. But I think that there is something else going on here.

Marriage in the ancient world was very different than it is now. We marry because we love another person, they married to maintain good social and family ties. We pick our own partner, typically, but the marriages then were arranged - a transaction between the elder male of each tribal family. In fact, life in the ancient Mediterranean world was pretty segregated so that men and women moved in different circles most of the time. We first encounter Mary and Joseph in Matthew's account in the odd sort of "in-between" time of betrothal. Mary is betrothed to Joseph, not yet living with him and his family but the contract has been signed and

the promises delivered. Even at this point a formal divorce would be required even though they are not technically married yet.

Mary comes to Joseph with this remarkable story. She's pregnant. And not only that, but by the Holy Spirit. This places Joseph in a multi-layered predicament. He is faced with the tension between duty, honor and compassion. The law is clear. He should divorce Mary at least, perhaps even submit her to the authorities for whom stoning was an option. Or he can believe her. We don't get any description of the way that this conversation happened, only that she was "found to be" with child. Perhaps she just can't hide it any longer, so she is into her third trimester when the truth is pretty obvious. Or perhaps she goes to him early on to tell him the story of this encounter with an angel. Or perhaps we can get very "real" about this story and say that this was an unwanted encounter with a friend or relative, adding another level of shame to the dilemma. For even in our world where ideas about the purpose and methods of marriage have changed, our treatment of rape victims as at least somewhat shameful has, it is sad to say, not changed very much.

Luke changes the story to give a much more clear picture of conception. The Holy Spirit "overshadowed" Mary and she became pregnant. But Matthew is much more vague, only allowing that this child conceived in her is "from the Holy Spirit", not that the Holy Spirit did the conceiving. At any rate, Joseph decides first to divorce her, then he has an encounter himself with an angel and is convinced to continue on with the marriage and to raise Jesus as his own son. And he does this, Matthew tells us, because he is a "righteous" man. As UCC pastor Katy Huey points out, "The early Christians of Matthew's community (just like us today) struggled with this question of obeying the Law while remaining faithful to the imperative to love one another. For them, the word "righteous" didn't mean hypocritical or judgmental, but faithful and good. Believers in every age have struggled with what to do when what we've been taught to do conflicts with what our hearts know is right and good. What then is true righteousness?" When there is every reason to judge, what does it mean that the parents who raise Jesus choose compassion, grace, mercy and forgiveness? If Joseph is the model of righteousness, how does that re-define righteousness for us today? Because I think that what we call righteousness today would have a far different reaction to such a scenario. Joseph has the power in this situation, Mary is vulnerable...and Joseph, the righteous one, sets aside a slavish dedication to the accepted law of the land for an expression of love and mercy.

At the heart of the Christmas story is the encounter with God in the scandals of life. What does it mean that our savior comes to us in the grips of a scandalous relationship, with an outlandish story about the conception of a child which both parents choose to embrace and obey? Can you imagine such a scenario today? I mean this is tabloid, soap opera stuff - though I doubt even a soap opera would

write such a fantastic explanation for what would be seen even today as disgraceful behavior. Nothing good can come of this. The story at this point seems all darkness – where is the light?

We don't get a lot of details from Matthew. Most of our Christmas story comes from Luke, you know the donkeys and sheep, the manger and the shepherds. Matthew is interested in letting us know something – the light has arrived, and it is working its way into the world through the choices we are making. The birth of the baby is the start, but there is still yet more truth and light set to break into our world. This baby is born, the one called Emmanuel – “God is with us”. The name “Emmanuel” is more than a nice name for a sweet baby. You might say that it frames the whole Gospel of Matthew, that it tells the story of what God is about and that in Jesus, we can see God and experience God's saving grace, God's endless mercy, God's healing love.

Well, that's just lovely, you might say. But wait a second...the child's name isn't Emmanuel...it's Jesus. Jesus doesn't even mean Emmanuel in some other language. True. The labeling of Jesus as Emmanuel is, like the Christmas story itself, a sacred thing, not a historical one. Let's go back to the scandal. What if Jesus is conceived out of wedlock? What if he is the child of Mary and someone else? What if Jesus is even, and this seems scandalous for even this pulpit, what if he is the product of a sexual assault? What does it mean that in the realization of the life of Jesus, in the teachings and example he set forth, in the way that Jesus lived beyond that scandalous start we see the action of God because we have no other way to explain it? What if decades later the community that followed Jesus read the scriptures, heard the words of Isaiah and thought – YES! That is what happened. Emmanuel! Somehow he was Emmanuel because he was God with us.

The angel says to Joseph at the height of the darkness he undoubtedly felt surrounding him...fear not. Move forward. Live your life out of love, not as a slave to the law for it is only there to lead you to love anyway. Trust. Jesus would soon pronounce this same thing, echoing the words of a contemporary Rabbi, the great Hillel, who said, “What is hateful to yourself do not do to another. That is the whole of the Law, the rest is commentary.” This re-definition of righteousness, this new imagining of the primary focus God would have for our lives is built into the Christmas story from the very beginning – the light of love-oriented lives shining against the darkness of small judgment, of narrow and petty legalism, of arrogant exclusion...that we can actually live beyond a retribution mindset and trust that if I don't return blow for blow, and live compassion not competition, that things will work out. That is the dawn of Christmas.

Dawn doesn't break all at once, you know. It's not like a Warner Brothers cartoon where the sun rockets into the sky like a shooting star. Dawn settles in.

That morning on the mountainside I was anxious for the dawn. I needed it like a reassuring hug. But it was painfully slow in arriving. When I felt like I could see enough to gather wood, I built that fire that seemed so superfluous the night before. And then I discovered as the light leaked across the horizon that I felt more connected to nature than I ever had before. I had been with it all night – really with it without being able to hold it at arms' length with all my fancy gadgets. It took the break of dawn for me to appreciate it and to realize that I had never been alone...it had just felt that way.

As the story of Christmas hangs about us this week, perhaps we can hear the announcement of the birth of Jesus, the one who will come in scandal, live in scandal and then die in scandal. The coming of the one who is a paradox, a justly broken rule from the beginning – he is born out of wedlock...announced by foreign magicians, he comes from a nowhere place like Nazareth, he reinterprets scripture, he changes the law, he forgives people...even the most unforgiveable, he eats with sinners and tax collectors, dies, this "King of the Judeans", as a common criminal and then defies even the rules of death by his resurrection.

Perhaps we can hear that when we say that Jesus came to save people from their sins it wasn't as the bloody payment in a cosmic transaction, but because of how he showed us to live. The era of survival is over – the rules of "kill or be killed" are gone. Think about what sin is and where it leaves the world. Think about everything that speaks and enacts brokenness, despair, dehumanizing and marginalizing people made in the image of God, rejecting God's good gifts of compassion, mercy and grace. Think about our resistance to things like poverty, racism, sexism, homophobia, war and violence. Think this Christmas about the ways that the darkness creeps back on us, telling us that that resistance does no good – war is inevitable, the rich stay healthy, the sick get poor, you'd better do your best to protect what's yours as the world slowly goes to hell.

And then remember this story. Remember that when the whole world said you should act one way, Mary and Joseph listened to that still, small voice...that sliver of light peeking over the horizon. God was with them in the scandal...the scandal that our doctored-up version of Christmas tries to gloss over quickly...but it remains. It remains to remind us that Emmanuel is as good a name as any – for in the child born on Christmas day that is what we see...God with us...God most fully present, most fully human...a light in the darkness, present in scandal, in glory, in silence and even in the darkness. Telling us in as many ways as possible...do not be afraid. Poverty can be ended, AIDS and cancer can be cured, DADT can be a thing of the past, we can begin to see one another as fellow children of God starting with ourselves and moving out to each and every person we encounter. In the most scandalous parts of our lives today, we might look for the indwelling of God...the light on the horizon.

Think of these things this week...and then come here Friday night...sing a few songs...sit in the darkness with us...and light a candle.

Merry Christmas.

AMEN



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