Unscandalized

Advent 4, Year A
Sunday, December 22, 2019
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We're geared up for a year of Sundays spent mostly with the Gospel of Matthew, my least favorite gospel.

Not that Matthew isn't a nice person. Nice guy, sure, stand-up guy, just a little flat. Matthew is like the auditor among the Gospel-writers, the one who always asks for the printed receipt from the barista, he's the guy who responds to the funny joke on Facebook with three paragraphs that begin, "Well, actually…"

Here's what I mean: Matthew's principle concern is with fulfilling things exactly, nervously, with checkboxes to cross off as though a preponderance of the facts could make you inevitably believe in Jesus as the Messiah. Every other action of Jesus' is followed by Matthew's quotation of scripture, to prove that Jesus is fulfilling the law and the prophets — unlike the storytellers, who let you infer these things by a well-told story.

Mark depicts the disciples in a constant state of confusion and panicked disarray. Matthew gets the story a decade or two later and says, "#Not all disciples," and has them nodding in perfect synchronicity with whatever comes out of Jesus' mouth.

You'll see the traditional depictions of the gospel writers carved into our altar: John is a fierce wild eagle, Luke is the massive muscly ox, Mark is a not only a lion but a lion with wings — and Matthew is a regular old guy. Even symbolically, he's boring. It's like even the ancient people who were deciding how to depict these great figures of the faith were like, Matthew? Move along, nothing to see here.

You, my friends, have been mercifully spared by our lectionary committee of ever hearing the beginning of his Gospel during church: it consists of 17 verses of, wait for it: a genealogy. "Abraham was the father of Isaac, Isaac the father of Jacob, Jacob the father of Judah" by verse three you're already glazed over, staring into space.

So we pick up on verse 18 in our Gospel today, which presents another sort of challenge. We hear the incredible story of a woman who becomes pregnant by the Holy Spirit of *God*. And unbelievably, the only person we hear from in Matthew's version of the annunciation is Joseph. How does this even happen? This is the story of a woman giving birth to God, and an unrelated *man* is the focal point, the hero of Matthew's story?

This is why I'm Team Luke, who has Mary herself consenting to the pregnancy and then bursting into a rebellious, scandalizing hymn we call the Magnificat. It's like fastidious and orderly Matthew cannot handle what was said about Mary. He is not alone in this. "Send the rich empty away," Mary sings, and Anglican bishops told the missionaries to India during the time of colonization not to sing it in public. Russians tzars forbid the song as well, nervous about teaching peasants that the will of God would be that "the mighty will be cast down."

As recently as the '80s, the song was banned by Guatemala's government. Around the same time, it was banned in Argentina after revolutionaries plastered posters with the words of the Magnificat over city squares.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer said it best: "The song of Mary is the oldest Advent hymn. It is at once the most passionate, the wildest, one might even say the most revolutionary Advent hymn ever sung. This is not the gentle, tender, dreamy Mary whom we sometimes see in paintings.…This song has none of the sweet, nostalgic, or even playful tones of some of our Christmas carols. It is instead a hard, strong, inexorable song about… the power of God and the powerlessness of humankind."[1]

We have a scandal on our hands with Mary. Matthew tries to sweep it quietly under the rug of the character of Joseph. He has other reasons, I think, but we'll stop there for the purposes of this sermon — you'll have to come to today's forum about the Nativity stories to hear about the rest.

But even fastidious Matthew doesn't make everything tidy as you'd expect, because his source material is Scripture, a very untidy thing itself. In his genealogy that we missed, Matthew makes a surprising addition to the usual unbroken pattern of a man who begot a man who begot a man, for 17 verses. He includes four women in there: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. You know them. Shameful women; our scrupulous friend Matthew can't even bring himself to say the name of Bathsheba, the downfall of his revered King David — he calls her, 'the wife of Uriah.'

Each one of these women, you could argue, tricked their way into this chosen line through unscrupulous means. Tamar disguises herself as a prostitute to conceive a child with her father-in-law, Rahab was an actual prostitute who sheltered the Hebrew spies, the foreigner Ruth appeared disguised in the dark night to unsheathe Boaz's… feet (the Bible's favorite euphemism); and Bathsheba had a habit of bathing in full view of the most powerful man in Israel.

This seems to be Matthew's apologetic recourse for the accusations flying around about Mary during his time, the kind of woman she was. So he appeals to his untidy tradition. Accuse Mary, and stand opposed to the most treasured inheritance we have: our histories, our humanity.

There is something deeply hopeful about this move, for Matthew and for me. You know that tidy, presentable, likable person you work to present before others? It seems like God has an entirely different set of values; that God sees the real us: ups and downs, the good and the bad, the reputable and the scandalous, and lifts all of it into his own inheritance as a human.

And maybe realizing this can change how you see another. Rather than be affronted by their beliefs or backgrounds or leanings or mannerisms, you could see a real person with a similarly complicated and totally redeemed lineage. Maybe if you believe that, the birth of Jesus the Messiah would take place for you in this way.

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[1] Connelly, Susan RSJ. "The Magnificat as Social Document." http://compassreview.org/summer14/3.pdf