

The Sign of Love

A sermon by Rev. Benjamin Broadbent
December 23, 2007 (4th Sunday of Advent)

I.

When it comes to the Christmas story, it is easy to conflate the varied stories of the early church into one story. We need to remember that, in the wake of Jesus' death and resurrection, communities had different versions of the savior's birth.

According to the earliest story, the Gospel of Mark, there was no special birth story. Jesus' beginning was his baptism.

According to the Gospel of Luke, the story centers on Mary, whom the Angel Gabriel visits and informs that she is pregnant. The birth of John the Baptist figures large in Luke's story, as do the shepherds, caught off guard by an angel chorus hovering over their flocks.

The Gospel of John tells not of a terrestrial birth, but a cosmic beginning, a time before time when all there was was God and God's wisdom, a wisdom that becomes incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the Christ.

The story which we consider today is from the Gospel of Matthew.

According to Matthew, a chapter's worth of story happens before John the Baptist is ever mentioned.

There are no angel choruses, no Angel Gabriel, no announcement to Mary, and no cosmic beginning. Matthew begins, "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham."

This list of ancestors sets the agenda for the chapter and, indeed, the whole Gospel.

Matthew sets out to answer the question, "Who is this Jesus whom we confess to be the Christ?"

The answers he gives abound: He is the Messiah. Or, in Greek, the Christ. He is the son of David. He is a descendant of Abraham. He is the savior of his people. He is Emmanuel, "God with us."

He is the Sign of God's love, or, in Walter Brueggemann's words, the sign of God's "relentless solidarity" with humanity and the earth.

All of this is fine and good. This is the agenda we would expect from a Gospel writer, at least one of them, and it is a settled fact in New Testament scholarship that Matthew and the other gospels were not written down until well after Jesus' death and resurrection.

Hearing Matthew's story of Jesus' birth tempts us, from our enlightened standpoint, to dismiss its authority: People made this up after the fact, we say. There is no historical basis that Jesus birth happened this way. These are fables. Mary and Joseph probably weren't even real people. While, from an historical-critical standpoint, these assertions may be true, they don't exhaust the truth.

Could it also be true, from a theological point of view, that Jesus' birth stories, handed down and interpreted variously from generation to generation, tell a story of God's intentions toward and regard for humanity? I hope you'll join me in leaving open the possibility that this might be the case.

II.

The clearest indication to me that Matthew's story of Jesus' birth might be true theologically is that it is conveyed in such an unassuming, almost absurd fashion.

It offends the sensibilities of those of us who have developed a demand for detail-oriented comprehensive renderings of historical happenings. Instead, this story is notoriously sparse on details. It invokes more questions than it provides satisfying answers.

To begin with, Matthew begins his account, "Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way." Then, Matthew proceeds to tell us almost nothing about Jesus birth.

When I think of a birth story, I am of course drawn to the birth of my son, Marin, a mid-summer, mid-heat wave, 11 days past his due date, 47-hour labor birth.

Now that's a birth story, told differently from my point of view versus that of Marin's mother, Brooke.

But our different versions are no less detailed, no less excruciating, and with no less joy and relief when it was all said and done.

The most beautiful birth story I witnessed was the one portrayed in Langston Hughes' "Black Nativity."

In that theatrical dance-retelling of Jesus' birth, Joseph goes to find help, during which time Mary does a labor dance, all by herself.

Her dance is, by far, the longest portion in the whole production, and has the effect of appearing endless, intense, and beautiful.

A woman, alone with her body, doing the beautiful labor, the excruciating work, of bringing a life, life itself, into the world.

Matthew's claim that "the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way," is an overstatement of what he does provide.

The story he tells is from the point of view of Joseph.

It includes his engagement to Mary and then his finding out that she is pregnant. What a conversation that must have been!

The story continues with Joseph's decision to dismiss Mary quietly, which was his duty, according to the law.

Then the story takes a turn with a dream in which Joseph is visited by an "angel of the Lord," which convinces him that he should take Mary as his wife.

In the same dream, the angel of the Lord tells him to name his son Jesus, or *Yeshua* in Hebrew, which means "God saves."

Finally the story tells us that Joseph took Mary as his wife and that they had no marital relations until she had born a son, and that he (that is, Joseph) named him Jesus.

III.

Matthew, Matthew, Matthew. You expect us to believe all this? It sounds like stories we encounter in the checkout line buying groceries. Headline: Righteous man claims he never had sex with his wife and that an angel assured him in a dream that neither had anyone else, save the Holy Spirit. What's Bill Cosby's Noah line? Right!

At the center of Matthew's narrative of Jesus' birth is a sex scandal and a laughably naïve character named Joseph. No wonder, outside of Luke and Matthew's infancy narratives, we don't hear much of anything about Joseph. He's a schlep. A sucker. A tool.

Best tell the story as quickly as possible, move beyond the scandal, beyond the embarrassment, and into the more laudable stuff before anyone notices.

But that is not our luxury today. We are left with the responsibility of lingering on this embarrassing text, this embarrassing character, just a little while longer, wondering if God may speak to us a new word out of this age-old scandal.

And let us begin by admitting that, while we'd like to think otherwise, there is something of Joseph in all of us.

Sometimes we choose to be naïve.

Sometimes we choose the non-prescribed path.

Sometimes we allow higher concerns to guide our decisions rather than common sense.

Sometimes the possibilities presented to us in dreams cause us to do the wrong thing rather than the righteous thing.

Sometimes our most far-fetched ideas cause us to ignore what others expect of us and to act in ways that allow newness to reign in an otherwise controlled atmosphere of possible outcomes.

IV.

If you'll permit me, I want to engage, for a moment, in an act of creative and critical thinking, an act known as interpretation.

The interpretation in which I want to engage is not the simple reading of a text and relating to you a meaning that is obvious and apparent on the surface.

Nor do I wish to engage in the act of demystifying the text, explaining away its artistry, thereby rendering it flat and innocuous.

Rather, I want to think critically and creatively while trusting the text to speak a word of life and allowing the text to have unmitigated and unabashed authority to speak such a word.

I want to engage in something like midrashic interpretation, the ancient and honored rabbinical practice of engaging the text on various levels.

Midrashic interpretation allows a text to have multiple meanings, insists upon minority voices being heard, and gropes for meaning that it knows is ultimately and always in process, elusive, and only ever understood in a community of those who love God and each other.

My midrashic interpretation of Joseph is this: Joseph took Mary as his wife, despite the scandal of her pregnancy with which he had nothing to do, because he *loved* her.

When he first found out she was “with child,” his conditioned response was to divorce her quietly, but he held off this automatic action till he could get some rest.

Joseph had learned to rely on the wisdom of his dreams, like his namesake of the coat of many colors.

In a dream, he was visited by God's presence, which gave him the means and justification whereby he would marry the one he loved and adopt the child developing within her.

You can hear Joseph's love in forms of Christian midrash we call songs or hymns or carols.

Do you remember the line from last Sunday's song? Did you hear it? "Oh Mary. Oh, Mary. You are the most beautiful thing in my life. Oh Mary. Oh, Mary. He will be my son and you will be my wife."

When I first heard that line, I had an "aha!" moment.

He *loved* her.

What else would explain his actions? What a miracle, one to rival even the virgin birth itself, that a person's love would cause one to shirk social and religious responsibility, to choose folly, and thereby to allow newness.

Or consider this carol, called "Young Mary Was to Be My Wife," or Joseph's Carol, composed by Daniel Bechtel, a United Church of Christ minister. Hear the description of Joseph's dilemma and the way in which love resolves it for him.

*Young Mary was to be my wife, the mother of my sons,
But when I heard she was with child, I would not take her home.
No other's love would be my bride; no other's child my son.
Then in a dream I heard God's voice, "Go love her as your own."*

*Despite my shame and shattered hopes, I took the angel's word.
Another's love lay in my arms; I loved her as my own.
With joy and pain she bore a child; I thought, "No son of mine."
Yet, when I held him in my arms, I loved him as my own.*

No, he doesn't figure prominently in the Christian story, but he looms large in our imagination. Who was this schlep that let his love get the better of him, and how can we be more schlep-ish like that? If God entrusted a most precious gift to a dreamer like Joseph, surely God entrusts the same to us, dreamers in our own right. Receiving this gift of God's own vulnerable presence, we become the sign of love for a world that has forgotten that all is gift, the gift of God's love, all in all in all.

*Although he was too young to speak, the blessing which he gave
Was love incarnate in the flesh, a presence which will save.
In this child's birth we hear God's word to all who have no home.*

“You are no other’s love or child; I love you as my own.”