

Sermon

What a Scandal!

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Bacon Memorial Presbyterian Church

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Our Old Testament scripture from Isaiah brings us that familiar promise from God. The young woman will give birth to a son, whose name will be Emmanuel, God with us. We have heard this scripture many many times before if we have been coming to worship throughout our lives. Now it doesn't say, it will be a virgin, we added that later, Isaiah just says look, the woman will bear a son. In order for us to hear the scripture with fresh ears, let me set the stage. King Ahaz was of great concern. He's worried about the impending forces that are coming toward Jerusalem and that Jerusalem would be captured. Divine intervention mediated through the prophet is to thwart the enemies of Jerusalem. He has offered a sign from God, if he, but ask for it, whether deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But King Ahaz has refused with the excuse that he does not wish to tempt God. This rejection of God's offer betrays his fear and his lack of trust. Even so Isaiah declares that God himself will give Ahaz a sign anyway, a woman pregnant with a child of promise. And yet devastation will come to the land of those who threaten Ahaz. It would be a challenge to claim today or any day that God will thwart all threats against us based on this gift that he has given us, the gift of a child as we know we have seen much hate and many wars in our world.

This Christmas story is an odd one after all. If the story were told today, as it was then, it would be filled with controversy and deceit. Many then and today still question whether Mary was a virgin, question her age, and

whether she was telling the truth. Even Joseph didn't believe her until God stepped in to convince him to do the right thing and accept Mary. Scripture tells us, "he planned to dismiss her quietly". But as the story goes, an angel came to Joseph and told him, "do not be afraid for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit." And there we have it...two young people, an unexplained and unplanned pregnancy, people of little means to take care of themselves much less a child and unwed. Not exactly the entrance for a King.

That's certainly not the Christmas we've come to know and celebrate is it...Our Christmas is Gifts under the tree, cookies baking in the oven, smiles all around, and a loving family gathered for a day of ham and the fixings, laughter and joy. Oh, what's that you say? Your Christmas doesn't play out quite that way? Can't afford too many gifts, no time to bake, and you're praying that cousin David doesn't show up intoxicated and angry, nearly ruining the holidays for grandma who inevitably cries when he finally leaves. Does that sound a little more realistic? Well you're not alone...Jesus could join you with his sorted family tree. Our scripture reading starts at verse 18 avoiding the sorted details of Jesus' earthly ancestry. Women who had been tossed from their families, men who cheated and killed - oh there was that cousin David of his or maybe a great Uncle.

The truth is that our version of Christmas is a downright scandal. In today's story of Mary and Joseph, God's work often upsets comfortable, social expectations and conventions. The first Christmas was not produced by a flawless lead up. An elaborate preparation that is dictated by

convention. Certainly most people would not expect the incarnation to happen to the life of the young virgin girl, Mary. Many of us forget just what a scandal the incarnation, and the virgin birth really were. Behind the pretty nativity scene lies both a wonder and a scandal.

In what ways have you failed to live up to the notion of a “perfect Christmas”? I can share with you that I didn’t get around to sending out Christmas cards this year - I’m sorry that I was unable to fit that in but it just wasn’t going to happen. I rarely wrap gifts and for the first time in my life, I did not bake cookies for my family. I did however help bake them for some of yours.

You see the inspired Irene Barry organized an evening to bake cookies for some of our members who don’t make it to church regularly so they could know how loved they were. It was not the greatest evening weather wise and for a little while it was just me and Irene and Bill. But soon thereafter, in walked Kristen with her cousin and her three teenaged children who had just moved here from Texas. And Michelle, my colleague from ECMC who attended church here last week for the first time when I was home with the flu but you all made such a wonderful impression on her, she came again. Then Barb and Peg and Kathy and soon we were mixing and baking - probably ended up with about 20 dozen cookies or so - 20 boxes filled. And I could sense the Holy Spirit was there - strangers no more, working together and enjoying every moment. And I think that is the true message of this text. That unexpected things, things outside of convention can often be wonderful signs that God is at work. Amid all our less-than-picture-perfect Christmases, the traditions that maybe don’t

happen this year, the cards that don't get mailed, the lives that are not as perfect as we want them to be, God does something new.

Somehow Joseph has to trust this strange news that this child is from the Holy Spirit; that he already has a name, Jesus; and that he will save people from their sins. Saved from sin by a baby who lies in a manger.

All we need to know in this moment, amidst this scandal, is that this little human then, and now, can show us a different way to be. When has someone loving on you actually changed your heart - especially when it was unexpected?

The news catches Joseph off guard. At this point in the story, he is totally unaware of the journey he will take and if he did, he would likely have become overwhelmed...so often God opens a door and beckons us with a vision and we must trust to follow not entirely sure where it will lead.

So are you feeling a little off your Christmas game this year? Good...that's exactly where you're supposed to be! As Mary and Joseph journeyed to the first Christmas, they did not know where God would take them; all they knew was that something wonderful had been promised and they were beckoned to follow. We don't know where the path of life leads us in 2023 but we do know when God leads us, something wonderful will happen and the path will be paved with love.

May you have a joyful and peaceful week filled with low expectations and a curiosity of just what God may be up to in your own lives.

Amen