

Isaiah 7:10-16
Matthew 1:18-25

“Joseph Cleaning the Manger”
First Presbyterian Church, Birmingham, AL
J. Shannon Webster

23 December 2007
4th Advent

Three weeks ago, the children were bringing in this manger – as part of the Moments with Children - to begin our Advent season. I was explaining to them what a manger was – that it was the trough the animals ate from. Young Will Earnhardt, with great certainty and some urgency, was quick to console me: “Joseph cleaned it first.” For some reason that struck me. I hadn’t had the thought before, but *of course he did!* Scripture doesn’t give us very much about Joseph, but from the little that we know of him the very least he did was clean out the manger. And he did a lot more than that. You’ve heard this story, but let’s tell it again – about Joseph.

Let’s quote Jack Shelton, too, at the start of this sermon. In the Adult Advent study Jack reminded us that Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Joseph, and while it does tie Jesus in to the lineage of the House of David, it is also a genealogy that is a list of sin and sorrow. There are thieves and liars and cheats and prostitutes in that lineage (like most of us would have in our own, could we track it back far enough or were the truth known). It was not into some special, more perfect family that Jesus was born, but rather a very human one. Matthew breaks with tradition by listing women in the genealogy, deliberately naming those who figure in the most sordid stories, and three of the four aren’t even Jews. It is not a very clean line.

Then, after giving us the genealogy, Matthew gives us a twist, ups the ante – and says, Joseph is not the biological father anyway! It was a dilemma for him. Marriage in that time and culture was not like marriage as we now know. Marriages were arranged by the family. It was a two-stage affair. First was betrothal – much stronger than our “engagement.” You were essentially married at that point, often 12 or 13 years old. The second stage was moving into the husband’s family home.

Mary was pregnant by the Holy Spirit – but who knew that or would have believed it. Joseph was not only within his rights to “dismiss her quietly,” in essence divorcing her. But that was the gracious and merciful way. An act of infidelity was adultery possibly punishable by stoning. Mary could have been in mortal danger. But Joseph is a gracious guy. No doubt the rumors would have spread like wildfire eventually, and no doubt they did, if we take the story at face value. Joseph’s reputation would have been sullied as well as Mary’s.

The poet W.H. Auden wrote:

Joseph have you heard what Mary said occurred?
Yes, it may be so. Is it likely? No.
Mary may be pure,
But Joseph, are you sure?
How is one to tell?
Suppose, for instance, well

Maybe, maybe not.
But Joseph, you know what
Your world will say about you anyway.

Luke's version of the story is the one that has the stable and the manger, and says there was no room in the inn. The scandal of the story was not that Christ was born in a stable and laid in a manger (that actually would have been a house's first floor guest quarters where the animals *did* stay); the scandal was that returning to his family's hometown, in a culture where hospitality is the highest of all virtues, Joseph had to resort to looking for an Inn at all.

But in our Matthew text: Just when Joseph had figured the most gracious way out of the situation, the angel showed up: "*Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid (Fear Not!) to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.*"

Joseph had to do a new thing, learn some new behavior, in order to trust God – take Mary as a wife, and name the boy Jesus. And like Mary, he responded to God, he trusted and acted. His response went way beyond decency, crossing the border into righteousness. And righteousness was not looking up the legal tort, but going against the grain of all around him to act out his trust in God.

This was a new thing. The Spirit brought this pregnancy into being. That's *pneuma* in Greek, but *ruah*, in Hebrew, translated as spirit, breath or wind. It was the *ruah* that moved on the waters in creation, the *ruah* that God breathed into Adam to cause life. When the *ruah*, the Spirit, is present, things happen that never happened before. Jesus happens.

So this is the mother of all unwed mother stories. And it is not a gentle tale, but rather one filled with ambiguity, complication, and danger. A family with a checkered past that runs from grand to sorry, social censure, ethical dilemmas, the threat

of violence, and fidelities called into question. Sort of like the lives we human beings know. It is exactly there that God decides to show up, in the most vulnerable of human circumstances and the most vulnerable of humans – a newborn.

There in the background we have Joseph – the guy who listens to angels and acts on what he hears, quietly doing the right thing, proof that contributing DNA does not necessarily a father make, but rather acting with grace and goodness no matter what. Of *course* he cleaned out the manger – in every metaphorical way you want to take that.

If Joseph and Mary are more than cardboard cutouts in a crèche, and I think the gospel-writers mean for us to think that they are, then what about this manger-cleaning? When 23% of Alabama's children live in poverty, how good a job can we say we are doing about cleaning the manger?ⁱ 38% of those do not have an employed parent.

Nationally, an average of four children die everyday as a result of child abuse and

neglect; in 2003, an estimated 1,500 children died from abuse and neglect. In Alabama during 2005, there were 30,771 cases of child abuse and neglect reported which involved 45,440 child victims. Eighteen Alabama children died from abuse and neglect in 2005.ⁱⁱ I don't have the more recent stats, but how good a job can we say we are doing, about cleaning out the manger?

In the United States over nine million children have no health insurance at all, some estimate that 107,000 of those children are in Alabama. Federal legislation that would have made that happen was vetoed, and you have to wonder how good a job you can say we are doing, about cleaning out the manger. We live in a world with over 25 million children homeless and living as refugees.ⁱⁱⁱ How good a job are we doing?

And yet, and yet... into this most troubled world, one of ambiguity and ethical dilemmas, with the threat of violence and questions about fidelity and faithfulness, God is faithful still and enters our reality to love and redeem us. All we really have to do is be faithful to God and clean out the manger when we get the chance. We are finally only human, but it is humans that God loves, that Christ came to save.

In the very middle of conflict, anxiety and fevered rush, remember Joseph, and listen to the angels sing. The story of Joseph and Mary is a story about us.

*1 Young Mary's not at the Mall tonight,
She's down in the barn with Joe.
They're holding something up to the light,
And they both are singing low.*

*The starlight's shining like never before,
So bright that the horses are wild.
Its puddling up on the walls and the floor
And the face of a human child.*

singin' Glory, glory, peace on earth; goodwill.

*Young Mary's not at the Mall tonight,
And all that Joe can see's
A Homecoming Queen who's holding so tight
The Promise of all that's to be.*

*And music comes drifting from over the pines,
As if someone sang along
Who knew the meter and all of the lines
To every blessed song . . .*

singin' Glory, glory, peace on earth; goodwill.

*Young Mary's not at the Mall tonight,
And now the baby is clinging to Joe.
It all goes to question what's wrong & what's right,
And all that you think that you know.*

*So Mary, she sings with the animal choir,
And Joe, he will only hum
While he loads up the truck, but his heart is on fire
With the Promise of all that's to come . . .*

singin' Glory, glory, peace on earth; goodwill.

- i National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University
- ii Voices for Alabama's Children
- iii Unicef