

A Child is Born
A sermon delivered by Rev. Jeanne Mills
at All Souls Unitarian Church
Sunday, December 24, 2000

Tonight, back home in Vermont at the Morgan Horse Farm where we have long boarded our horses, there is a “live” creche complete with sheep, donkeys, and -- instead of camels -- camelids: llamas from the local llama farm. An improvised manger holds straw bedding and a life-sized doll -- the baby Jesus -- “dressed in swaddling cloths.”

A thousand lights glitter from the rails of the pasture fences. Hundreds of luminaria light the way for the faithful who will trudge the frozen dirt road to pay homage to the effigy of the child born in a stable.

It didn't used to be this way. The cynics in our town mutter that it wasn't until the owners of the place got in trouble with the IRS that the wife remembered her having a vision of Mary, the mother of Jesus, while visiting the site in Ephesus, Turkey where Mary is supposed to have spent her final days.

But despite the cynics -- there in the Green Mountains of Vermont -- and across the centuries -- the story of the baby born in Bethlehem draws the faithful in unending procession.

It's a story with few (albeit fantastic) details, recorded in two of the four Gospels of the Christian bible -- the “Gospel” (or “Good News”) of Matthew and the Gospel of Luke. It's interesting how these two sources are conflated -- our minds interleaving the particulars of angels and shepherds and gifts of the Magi into a seamless whole.

But there are key differences. In the Gospel of Matthew -- from whence our reading this morning -- Joseph is the central character. The angel comes to him, hailing him as “Son of David” (for it is through Joseph that Jesus can claim lineage in “the House of David). The angel says that Mary -- Joseph's betrothed -- will bear a son and that he -- Joseph -- is to name him -- calling the child, “Iesous” (the Hellenized version of the Hebrew “Yeshua” -- for “Healer” -- or “Savior” -- “he who shall save his people from their sins.” 1:19)

The angel appears in a dream (reminiscent of an earlier Joseph -- the Joseph-of- the-coat-of-many-colors -- who also was noted for his dreams) -- following Joseph's decision to “divorce” Mary after learning that she is pregnant with someone else's child.

The Jesus Seminar scholars -- some of whom -- Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan -- have spoken here -- employ a list of criteria against which they judge the “facticity” of the Jesus stories. Topping their list is “the criterion of embarrassment” -- those stories unlikely to have been invented by the early church, since such material casts an unflattering light and creates “theological difficulties” for the true believers. (A Marginal Jew, II, John P. Meier, 1994, p5)

It was, for example, an acute embarrassment that Jesus -- the long-awaited one -- the Messiah -- the King of the Jews -- would die like a common criminal, crucified on a cross, between two thieves. But such was the history -- recorded in independent accounts. So, by the same criterion, was Jesus' illegitimacy an embarrassment -- something to be ameliorated or swept under the rug, if possible.

Mary -- if typical of the customs of that time -- under Jewish law, was "betrothed" -- or "promised" to Joseph -- while she was still a teen-ager. Marriage then was a two-step process. The first step -- betrothal -- granted the husband all conjugal rights even as the girl/woman continued to live under her father's roof. Only when the husband took her to live in his house was the couple recognized as fully married.

But the story reveals that -- "before they came together" -- Mary was pregnant. Matthew says that "Joseph -- being a just man and unwilling to put (Mary) to shame -- resolved to divorce her quietly." (M1:19)

Calling Joseph "a just man" meant that he kept the Jewish Law. And the law was most explicit regarding a betrothed woman's sexual relations with anyone other than her legally-regarded husband. (Deut 22:23-27). If she was found not to be a virgin, then she was brought to her father's dooryard and there the men of the city would stone her to death." If a woman and a man were discovered in adulterous behavior, then both would be stoned to death. In the case that a betrothed virgin was raped, only the man would be put to death -- yet the husband-to-be had the option to "divorce" -- terminate the contracted marriage.

What about this virginity thing? Except as I've just mentioned in the cases of betrothal (read "transfer of 'property' rights"), issues of virginity, celibacy, monogamy in the Hebrew bible are not celebrated virtues or their absence a stigma. Quite the opposite. There is far more lament over barren-ness and infertility which are deemed a curse. There are many stories of divine intervention to produce a miraculous child -- the story of John the Baptist's aged parents, for example, but none of these excludes a biological father or has God "father" the child. If anything, these stories potentiate the couple's natural processes of child-bearing.

Mary Radford Reuther in *Mary, The Feminine Face of the Church*, writes:

"...(t)he earliest Christian traditions did not preclude -- with God's intervention in Jesus' birth -- Joseph's fatherhood. Mary might have been...a girl betrothed so young as to conceive before menstruation had given any evidence of her fertility. Rabbinic writings refer to such as "virgin births."(34-5) In fact, the whole question of Mary's assumed virginal state preceding conception and during conception (we don't dare to enter the morass of those extreme "Mariologists" who maintain that Mary remained virginal after Jesus' birth -- and despite references to Jesus's brothers and sisters (maybe they were all Joseph's children by a prior marriage)

Under Jewish law, an observant Jew like Joseph would be justified in divorcing his betrothed -- whether she had willingly submitted, was a compliant victim, or had been forcibly raped. The law was clear what Joseph's options were.

But Joseph does the compassionate thing. He decides not to take her to court and publicly shame her, but to “quietly” -- privately -- divorce her.

But in his dream -- visited by an angel -- Joseph does better than that: he took his wife to his home, “knew her not until she had borne this son” -- whom he -- Joseph -- called Jesus -- his naming the child (unlike the Gospel of Luke in which Mary names the son) a sign of Joseph’s adopting him as his own.

In the Luke narrative, the first birth story is that of John the Baptist, born through divine intervention by which Elizabeth’s barren-ness was ended and this son was born. The Angel Gabriel promised this baby’s father that his son would -- among other things -- “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children -- not their children but children in general.” With Jesus’s ministry, a new tenderness toward children: “Suffer the little children...” and clearly a widening of one’s sympathies -- not just to the droning list of one’s genealogy to which all kinship loyalties and enmities were endlessly recited -- but a new conceiving -- who is my mother, who are my brothers? These are my mother and brothers -- those who hear the word of truth.

Returning to the criterion of embarrassment to determine the “historical” facts of Jesus’ life, it was both the scandal of Jesus’ death and the scandal of his uncertain parentage (as Marlin said a few weeks ago -- Jesus’ bastardy coded in the text by calling him “the son of Mary” and not “Yeshua ben Joseph” -- Jesus, son of Joseph.

Messiness like this -- which the millennia of spin-doctors -- venerating the text even as they would perfect it -- could not eradicate.

But can we imagine that Jesus’ illegitimacy was as liberating as it was damaging to this extraordinary young man -- about Marlin’s age when he died -- who left his parables, his stories for the world’s re-telling? Jesus the outsider -- claiming his true father was in heaven. And Mary, perhaps only a dozen years older than Jesus, he querulously demands to know: Who is my mother? -- perhaps harshly judging her for making him “different.”(recall the story Marlin had me read to you a few weeks ago of the woman accused of adultery and the crowds turned away when Jesus challenged that he who is without sin, cast the first stone.)

And Mary, the object of all those prayers of adoration and intercession on the Rosary beads, Mary was a teen-aged pregnancy, “virginal” by virtue of being pre-menarche -- and yet, not impossible, become pregnant before the onset of her first period. If Mary’s pregnancy was the result of seduction, or her willing compliance, by law, both Mary and the male could be stoned to death -- the penalty for adultery -- which makes the story of Jesus intervention in the woman who was to be stoned -- Jesus asking he who is without sin to cast the first stone -- all the more poignant.

But if Mary’s pregnancy was the result of rape, then only the man would be stoned -- this “the Father who art in Heaven?”

The pages do not tell us. What we know is that Joseph, called “just” -- meaning “Torah-observant” -- who, by law could publicly shame Mary and drag her through divorce court -- or “quietly” -- privately -- divorce her -- had decided to do the latter. But then an Angel came and told him that it would be a son and that he was to name the baby Jesus, Healer.

So, this story, for me, has become the story of choice, or, "Love is optional." There are so many decisions, or choices these days about when, or whether, or even how to have -- and not have -- a baby -- the technology and our pseudo-sophisticated understanding of mitosis and meiosis -- have all gotten in the way in the way of our wonder of a new baby.

This story of Mary and Joseph and Jesus is a story of heart-break, redeemed by a new birth -- and surprisingly, less about Mary -- who had no choices whatsoever. Another birth story in the gospel of Luke, the birth of John the Baptist who, the text says, came to have the fathers tend to the children.

Story of Barry Kaufman, son-rise,

Maybe the true meaning of Christmas is that every child conceived, a beloved child. No child conceived an unwanted baby. No baby born ever unloved. And we are the ones put here to help love them. For unto us these children of the world are born -- an Angel told us so.

Hymn: I Heard the Bells on Christmas Day"[Ask that all mothers and sons, fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, fathers and daughters -- no matter the age -- come forward to take finger bells to help us sing our final hymn -- Caroline or Shannon distribute?]

Benediction: "For so the children come. And so they have been coming. Always in the same way they come, born of the seed of man and woman. Perhaps no angels herald their beginnings. Perhaps no prophets predict their future greatness. Perhaps no wisemen see the star that shines to show where lies the child who will save humankind. Yet each child is a holy child. Each father and mother has seen the glory of life beginning anew. And each night a child is born is a holy night. Go now with a prayer for peace in your hearts and the work of preserving innocence -- on earth as it is in Heaven -- in your own hands. Go in peace, to be peace. Shalom. Amen.

Reading: The Gospel according to Matthew (1:18-21) (RSV)

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way:

When his mother, Mary, had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together, she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit. Her husband, Joseph -- being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame -- resolved to divorce her quietly.

But as he considered this, behold an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary your wife, for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Prayer: Let us join together in prayer and silent meditation.

O Spirit of the true Christmas, in the silence and immensity of the universe, frail and fragile human beings stare into the vastness of space searching for a star -- a sign -- proof from afar that we are

not alone. While here at home -- on this precious Mother Earth -- we are saved -- time and time again -- from our common human predicament -- saved by modest acts of simple compassion from the merely mortal.

We do not pretend to know why grace happens -- or why Life helps us -- why our finitude is embraced by infinity. Heaven and earth came together -- they say -- in a babe born in Bethlehem. But so, too, with every child born into this one sweet, sad, mysterious existence. The Holy Spirit hovers always -- ready to assist -- midwife to the birth of the Christ within us all. Here in the bleak midwinter, let our souls magnify you -- O Spirit of Life and Light -- and rejoice. [Silence]
[Choral: "Gather Round the Manger" #229] Amen