

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
The Rev. Barbara Hutchinson
4th Sunday of Advent
December 18, 2016

Perhaps like you, when I hike in the autumn, with the crisp and clear air causing my face to tingle my face, when the bright yellow and crimson leaves compel me to enter deeply into the woods, I often gather a few acorns to hide away in my pocket while I walk along, under the canopy of the towering trees. There's something about the contrast between the smoothness of the shell and the bumpiness of the cap that seems to delight or entertain me as I move them around in my hand, as I walk ever deeper into the forest. It can almost become a prayer or meditative practice, like working my way through prayer beads or fingering a stone worn smooth through exposure to the elements. Often, when I stoop down to pick up another acorn, I have what I imagine is a very common experience. I marvel that this two-hundred-foot oak tree I'm standing under actually began as this tiny seed. In addition to noticing the contrast in size between the seed and the tree, I notice how remarkable it is that all that will shape and define this very large oak tree was found in the tiny embryo of an acorn, like the one rolling around between my fingers. The sturdiness of the trunk, the roughness of the bark, the scaffold shape of the branches, and the delicate tips of the leaves which turn brown late in the fall are all determined by that which the acorn contains.

Birth narratives are often described similarly to this acorn-oak pattern, whether we share with each other the birth stories of our children, or as the gospel writers share the story of Jesus' birth. It is often true that the larger dynamics that will shape one's life (the oak) are present in embryonic form in the story of one's birth (the acorn). Who we have become will often shape how our birth story is told and often what is present at our birth will shape how our life unfolds. So, let's see what Matthew thinks will define Jesus' life by looking closely at the way this gospel writer describes the in-breaking of God into our world through Jesus' conception and birth.

If we were to have read the very beginning of Matthew's gospel today, the first thing we would notice would be that the first sixteen verses are a very long genealogy, tying Joseph to the line of King David. We know right from the beginning that Jesus' connection to the house of David is going to be a strong theme in Matthew's gospel. This in turn, supports the theological claim in Mathew's gospel that Jesus is the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Messiah will be a Son of David.

As we are reading through the genealogy and hearing generation after generation being listed, we suddenly come to this rather awkward line, where we expect to read that Joseph fathered Jesus, and we see instead, Joseph, husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, and who is called the Messiah.

The tension in the story of course is that Mary is pregnant before she and Joseph lived together. This line screams of scandal! Matthew, the narrator, tells us right up front, in a rather matter-of-fact way, that Mary was found to be with child conceived by the Holy Spirit. So, we

know it's not really a scandal, but it sure appears to be so to Joseph and to the rest of the village. You can almost hear the rumor mills buzzing and the gossip spreading like wild-fire. Shame has a way of taking on a life of its own and we can imagine Mary would soon become a victim of criticism and ridicule.

However, let's think more closely about this situation for a moment. For, by Matthew's pairing the movement of the Holy Spirit with an event such as Jesus' conception, which would easily be perceived as scandalous by outsiders, Matthew asserts the theological claim that Jesus was from the beginning and remained to the end, seen as a scandal in the eyes of our world. Jesus, the incarnation of amazing and transformational love breaking open the societal norms and conventions of the day, was a scandal. This is a very challenging message for most of us, when we realize that God breaks into our world through that which we or others often consider to be scandalous. We have been taught to dismiss, turn away from, and distance ourselves from anything scandalous, but here Matthew is telling us to look within the scandal to find the marvelous deeds of God.

We can hear this message as an invitation to us to engage in the creative, hard, and holy work of repenting, of going beyond where our mind is now, of exploring the possibility of that which we find most scandalous, most controversial, most against what we've always believed, most against what is claimed to be wrong by the law, and to explore whether it may be of the Spirit's doing. It was by the Spirit that Mary, an unmarried woman, betrothed to Joseph, conceived. The in-breaking of God into human form did not come as may have been expected, or as was conventional, or as would have made sense to all people.

What we perceive as scandalous often involves some moral judgment on our part and so this passage is a good reminder to look into those places when judgment upon someone else seems to rise abruptly and passionately in our souls and to discern thoughtfully, and with God, whether the situation could rather be of the Spirit, as was the case with Jesus' conception. The way the birth story is written by Matthew encourages us to imagine that what appears to be a scandal on one level as actually being the work of God on a deeper level. Unexpected things, things outside of convention can be wonderful signs that God is at work.

In addition to those situations when moral judgment is involved, I think this invitation to creative, hard, and holy work also extends to those moments when you say to yourself, or to me, or to others, "How can this be?", "This doesn't make sense!", "There's nothing rational about doing this!" or "This isn't at all what I thought would be asked of my life", that you can see that these moments hold the potential for being of the Spirit.

We often push them away. We often deny their reality. We often resist believing in the movement of Spirit which pushes us into uncomfortable or unexpected situations: those moments when you feel compelled to love the one you used to hate, or when you feel driven to random acts of kindness the extent to which you would never have imagined, or when you dare to risk it all, comfort and prosperity, for the gospel, or when you hear God's invitation to work

toward justice and it costs you some relationships, or when you look at the person across from you from whom you have been estranged for years and your heart bursts open with love. This is God's in-breaking of the kingdom into your heart and into our troubled world in these unexpected moments, which may, on the surface, appear scandalous to you or others. I invite you to trust that these are from God, for through Jesus' birth, God is within us, and the Spirit is moving within our lives, and it is often not at all as we expected, hoped for, or imagined.

The acorn of our gospel story of Jesus' conception today reveals the truth that Jesus' teachings were controversial to most; his interpretation of the law was extravagant in the eyes of the Pharisees; his claims of identity were blasphemous to the religious leaders; and his life which included eating with tax collectors, sitting with the outcast, speaking directly to Samaritan women was scandalous, because he loved extravagantly. We, as followers of Christ, are called to follow his example and love extravagantly as well, even if it appears to others as scandalous.

The third theme that Matthew plants within the birth narrative involves Joseph's response to this controversial situation his fiancée finds herself in. Matthew shows us what radical faith looks like, and it is not necessarily logical and is certainly is not formulaic. Joseph is our example of a faithful response which involves taking a risk to repent, to stretch our mind beyond where it is now, and to discern the movement of the Spirit in places and ways we could never have previously imagined.

Joseph had a choice to make about Mary. According to the law, it was his right to demand a public trial, to expose Mary's condition, to get an answer as to the origin of her pregnancy. But Mary's situation would only be made worse by the shame involved in the trial, and Joseph's compassion and love for Mary didn't allow him to do that. He decides rather to break the marriage quietly. In Matthew's mind, and to his audience's ears, that makes Joseph righteous, not demanding public and legal exposure and punishment, as would be his right under the law but sensitively applying the law, trying to save Mary's honor and mitigate any possible shame. He is trying to respect the woman he loves (even though he doesn't understand her situation) yet not to undercut the purpose or the nature of the law under which they both lived. Joseph carefully navigates the tension between the law and love. He wants to make sense of the equally important questions: "What does the law demand?" and "What does my heart tell me to do?" Joseph sets the stage for Jesus to follow in his footsteps of fulfilling the law by stretching his mind beyond it, and by allowing love to interpret it. This, of course, is the struggle and path Jesus takes throughout his life and ministry.

The way Matthew tells the story of Jesus' birth reveals the truth that Jesus' life and our discipleship will proclaim: Jesus is the Messiah; the Holy Spirit moves in unexpected and often scandalous ways; we are asked to repent, to stretch our mind beyond where it is now, so that we may faithfully respond in faith not fear; and that love should always be the interpreter of the law.

That tiny baby found in a manger on the morning we name as Christmas contained the truth of God which we are invited into. May these truths be what defines and shapes our lives as we follow Christ into world.