

A Child of Mary

Matthew 1:18-25

Years ago, when I was serving my first church in Schenectady, New York, I learned many lessons that were not a part of my seminary education. At the time, I was a fresh-faced twenty-five-year-old, whose sophistication and life experience was painfully lacking, particularly in comparison to my predecessor, who had retired from the church after a 30-year ministry. When Advent arrived a month following my start, the only guide I had for leading the congregation through the Christmas season was what I recalled from a few years earlier as a disinterested preacher's kid in high school, half-tuned-in to watching my father carry out the ceremonies of the season.

Needless to say, for my initial run through Christmas as a spiritual leader, there was much more in the way of spontaneous innovation than familiar ceremony for the members of Tabernacle Baptist. For one thing, it didn't occur to me that Advent was intended to be a separate season onto itself, so I naively mixed in a bit of Lent, (i.e., the "bloody" Gospel songs associated with Good Friday) along with the beloved carols of Christmas, thinking I was being theologically clever by capturing in one service the entire life of Jesus. I hoped I might impress them with my liturgical creativity! So for all four Sundays in Advent, we'd begin by enjoying one of our favorite carols of the newborn babe born in a stable, which then was juxtaposed with a morbid hymn of how Jesus' veins were pouring out a fountain full of blood! To be honest, it sounded more like a miscarriage had occurred in Bethlehem than the birth of the Savior!

As I said, my sophistication was lacking, but one thing I recall that did go well was an attempt to reach out to our local community. Since Schenectady was a depressed city (emotionally, as well as economically), the neighborhoods around the church were made up of many low-income households, unemployed workers, and elderly seniors barely surviving on their Social Security monthly checks. Tabernacle reflected this in the makeup of the congregation, though it offered very little in the way of actual ministry as a church to the community. That first Christmas, though, we organized a party for neighborhood children, with the hope that some of them might come again to help us create the semblance of a Sunday School.

A sweet and tirelessly optimistic soul named Anna DiMarco planned the event. She managed to convince some of the grandmothers to assist her with making cookies and putting up decorations in the church hall. On the afternoon of the party, Anna succeeded in attracting several of the kids from around the area, enlisting her husband, Allen, to dress up as Santa Claus in order to hand out small packages and treats to each child that came. I played my guitar and led the Christmas songs the kids knew, which consisted more of Rudolph and Frosty than baby Jesus and Wisemen. All in all, it was a successful effort, which was repeated over the next few years and even helped Anna build the Sunday School and bring in a few neighborhood families.

However, a moment that stuck with me that first year was when I noticed a young woman standing shyly by the doorway watching the children. I assumed she was a family member of someone there, but no one seemed to know or interact with her. When she was beckoned

by one of the church ladies to come in, she shook her head and refused. Trying to be welcoming, once we finished singing, I went over to her to invite her in. When she saw me approaching, she quickly turned to head up the stairs.

I pursued her, catching her at the door. I asked if she was one of the mothers, explaining we'd be done in another half-hour if she wanted to wait and even join us for refreshments. She looked at me strangely and shook her head, pointing to her midsection as if I should have known something. I noticed she was pregnant, but I missed the connection she was trying to make. I still didn't know if she was related to anyone downstairs and it seemed apparent that she wasn't going to tell me anything about her.

In hindsight, maybe I should have let her go and left it at that, but at the time I was more interested in hospitality and outreach. So I bluntly asked the woman her name and that of her husband. Without any hesitation, she shot back that she wasn't interested in what we were doing and that the name of the father was none of my business. I was startled by her reaction and taken back by her hostile tone.

Immediately, I apologized, saying, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to upset you; I just wanted you to feel free to join us." She glared back at me in a way that drained the spirit right out of me for the rest of the day: "You don't know nothing," and brusquely pushed her way out the door. I never saw her again.

Frankly, I was haunted by the startling jolt this gave to the day's event and even to the rest of the Christmas season. At first, I wondered what I might have done to provoke her reaction but, after thinking it over, I came to the conclusion that it wasn't so much about

me, as it was about her. I had to admit I really don't know what people's situations are, or what they go through, or how they view their life compared to others. Sometimes what seems joyous and uplifting to me affects someone else differently. Each story has its own drama. Each person has their own pain.

The fact that she pointed out her pregnancy, as if I should figure things out, led me to wonder if this young woman came, not to watch kids with Santa, but for something else. Maybe she came through the unlocked door to this city church looking for some spiritual support—possibly even the presence of Mary whose story she may have heard as a child, but now as a young pregnant woman, it may have resonated with her in a more meaningful way. I don't know. If it was true, what I prayed for was that at some point she found what she was looking for with the hope, ultimately, that everything would work out for her child as well.

That experience made me keenly aware how the Christmas story speaks to our human condition in a variety of ways, and that, in spite of its romantic charm with all of its rough edges worn down and smoothed by its annual retelling, it still manages to reach us in the all-too-human dramas of life. In this case, this young woman may have come to the church that day to see if this distant memory of a young Mary's son, somehow, could be refreshed, so that she might know her own child would be okay, no matter if the circumstances around her pregnancy were messy and frightening.

I suppose because there are two version of the story of Jesus' birth, it invites interpretations as varied as our circumstances in life. Luke offered his more as a social critique of his world, emphasizing

the humble beginnings of Jesus' life—homeless and in a stable among the world's poor. Matthew, on the other hand, placed his attention on the messiness of human relations, making at least part of the story more about the impact of Mary's pregnancy on those around her. Mary's child is born against the backdrop of disgrace and despair, potentially a single mother and a fatherless child. Matthew is the one who addresses the reality that maybe Mary's pregnancy wasn't such welcomed news to her or to Joseph.

Mary's situation, to those who understand all too well, would have been of a young woman in her teens who couldn't credibly explain how she became pregnant, or at least identify who the father was—a condition some women find themselves in when their bodies have been objectified merely to suit the pleasure of a man. What seems like love may result in multiple partners in exchange for tenderness and affection. Mothers, of course, are the ones who bear the consequences of love that is lost, or never expected; birth fathers can walk away from a child sometimes without recrimination or even knowing a life has been conceived in the womb of a lover. Life is like that—messy, often unfair, where relationships are disappointing and difficult; a mother is usually the one who cannot run away from her child or easily move on. She is the one who bears a child potentially without a father present and sometimes, without much support or hope.

One of the signs of redemption in this ancient story from Matthew is that we're told Joseph did not abandon Mary, even though he wasn't the father of her child. Instead of washing his hands of this seemingly sordid and sorrowful mess by divorcing Mary right

from the start, he listened and responded to an angel's whisper to sacrifice his pride and disappointment in order to do the right thing. This story may have never made it to the biblical canon if Joseph hadn't decided to step up and take responsibility for a life that was not his own. He rose above his personal rights as a husband and chose (perhaps against the advice of his friends and family) to share the social disgrace of his pregnant wife in an era that would otherwise condemn her. It was a huge risk to take and he provides an important example of how love and honor can overcome a broken and angry heart and redeem an unforgiving situation. We're left to imagine the details of Matthew's drama, but we also know it's a choice people face more than we are aware.

I don't know what ever happened to the young woman in Schenectady. I never learned her name, or heard how her story unfolded, or if she was able to find whatever she was looking for. I suppose, that's the way it was meant to be to remind me that pastors don't have all the solutions to life's problems, or that all of our human dramas have happy endings. We would pray they do. We want them to.

But what we do have—and this is the message inherent in our Christmas story—is that God's love is made manifest and real in unforgiving and painful circumstances. If a child of Mary—regardless of who we are to believe the father was, missing or present—in our life or in someone else's—represented the spirit of redemption to the world, how might we embrace those in similar circumstances who need the unquestioning assurance that what they are facing, and the child she is bearing, doesn't deserve the shame and disgrace of

human scorn or judgment. It's a child—a newborn who represents a fresh start with love—love that has the power to be redemptive!

If Christ himself was born in such messy and distressing circumstances, is that not where God enters into our world to become like us? Is this not what the message of Christmas is: that no matter the circumstances of human life, God will be there with us with the grace and love we need to overcome the most difficult pain we bear.

How mother-like the Wisdom
That carried and gave birth
To all things, seen and unseen,
And nurtured infant earth:
Unstinting, unprotected,
Prepared for nail and [scorn],
Constricted into maleness,
And of a woman born. ¹

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¹ Brian Wren, *Her Baby, Newly Breathing*, verse 4.