

Introduction

Check-in & Introductions

Gathering the Outcast

Old Testament Lesson

Zephaniah 3:14-20 (NRSV)

¹⁴ Sing aloud, O daughter Zion;
shout, O Israel!
Rejoice and exult with all your heart,
O daughter Jerusalem!
¹⁵ The LORD has taken away the judgments against you,
he has turned away your enemies.
The king of Israel, the LORD, is in your midst;
you shall fear disaster no more.
¹⁶ On that day it shall be said to Jerusalem:
Do not fear, O Zion;
do not let your hands grow weak.
¹⁷ The LORD, your God, is in your midst,
a warrior who gives victory;
he will rejoice over you with gladness,
he will renew you^[a] in his love;
he will exult over you with loud singing
¹⁸ as on a day of festival.^[b]
I will remove disaster from you,^[c]
so that you will not bear reproach for it.
¹⁹ I will deal with all your oppressors
at that time.
And I will save the lame
and gather the outcast,
and I will change their shame into praise
and renown in all the earth.
²⁰ At that time I will bring you home,
at the time when I gather you;
for I will make you renowned and praised
among all the peoples of the earth,
when I restore your fortunes
before your eyes, says the LORD.

Gospel Lesson

Matthew 1:18-25 (NRSV)

¹⁸ Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹ Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰ But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹ She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." ²² All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

²³ "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." ²⁴ When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵ but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Bible/Sermon Focus

In the beginning of Luke's Gospel, we hear a very familiar birth narrative. One that has elements like many birth narratives found throughout the Old Testament. It's the story of a barren woman who is finally able to get pregnant at the intervention of God. Her husband is a God-fearing man of the Law, a priest in fact. Both were advanced in age. One day as he is making an offering to God in the temple an angel appears to him and tells him that his wife will become pregnant.

This story resembles so many other stories in the Bible that if we are Biblically literate, we could almost write it ourselves. This is THE way God intervenes within the family structure to keep the covenant of God progressing forward. So, this is the way that would make sense for the messiah to enter into the world, and into the story. A familiar story. But this is not the birth narrative of the messiah. This is the birth narrative of John the Baptist, son of Elizabeth and Zechariah.

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This week we begin to get a glimpse of the people who will be the parents of the messiah, in our text from the Gospel of Matthew. The birth narrative of the Messiah is only told in two gospels, Matthew and Luke. Mark and John jump straight into the ministry of John the Baptist. Matthew's Gospel begins with a genealogy tracing the line of Joseph all the way back to Abraham. Like genealogies listed in the Old Testament we hear "so and so was the father of so and so"... it can get so boring that many of us just gently skip over these genealogies. But Matthew's genealogy is strikingly different for a couple of reasons. For example, it lists women. Not for every generation, but four times it lists women from this line, women that we have read about in the Old Testament, foremothers in our faith! And who does it list? Sarah, the barren woman who conceives at an old age, lifted for her faithfulness? Rachel, the barren mother and favored wife of Jacob who eventually births Joseph (who saves everyone from starvation)? No.

No. It lists Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba (listed as the wife of Uriah). The genealogy of Jesus lists four sexually-compromised women. Not the kind of women we would lift up as a shining example of godliness. And then at the end of this genealogy Matthew tacks on Mary, even though it is not Mary but Joseph who follows the line of King David.

What child is this? What kind of messiah comes to us through an unwed pregnant young woman who would be considered among the ranks of women like Tamar? What child is this that would have a man like Joseph for a father? He breaks all of the rules. Men were the patriarchs of the family; they had the power. This was *how things worked*, you know?

When the angel told John's Dad Zechariah that Elizabeth would be pregnant, Zechariah doubted the angel. As a consequence, he was struck silent for Elizabeth's entire pregnancy and

then some. And Joseph? We don't even hear him speak. Not once. He bucks every single stereotype of what a man and father should be.

Amy R. Barbour writes of Joseph, *"By marrying Mary, Joseph does not become her patriarch but her collaborator (or even her supporter). Their marriage becomes an alibi concealing the (perceived) illegitimacy of her pregnancy. Instead of socially confirming their respectability, the marriage becomes the institution concealing their shame."*

This is how the messiah shall enter into history. With a mother whose decency and reputation could have had her shunned, if not killed. And a father who redefines masculinity as defined by the cultural standard of their day. Mary and Joseph could have lived their lives in shame, as do so many people do who do not fit the "normal" way of being in the world, and of being family. But maybe that's the point.

In our text from Zephaniah this week we hear that God, "...will save the lame and gather the outcast, and will change their shame into praise and renown in all the earth."

Who are the outcasts? Who has shame that needs redeemed? In the birth narrative of Jesus we find that the Holy Spirit not only creates family where there was no family, but also that she shatters our expectations to create something even better. She shatters a genealogy to create something even better. She shatters the same old patterns that we have known and expect, and given us something beyond our wildest dreams.

Discussion Questions

1. Discuss the stories of Tamar, Rahab, Ruth & Bathsheba. Why would Matthew include these women in the genealogy?
2. How has the Messiah (Jesus) surpassed your expectations?
Is there anyone in your life that reminds you of Joseph? How?
3. Reflect on this quote from Amy R. Barbour, *"By marrying Mary, Joseph does not become her patriarch but her collaborator (or even her supporter). Their marriage becomes an alibi concealing the (perceived) illegitimacy of her pregnancy. Instead of socially confirming their respectability, the marriage becomes the institution concealing their shame."*
4. If a pregnant teenager walked into our church on Sunday morning, what would be your initial thoughts about her?
5. How does the Spirit use the church and its members to make family where there was no family?

Prayer

O Come Branch of Jesse's stem and rescue your people from hell. Save them. Give them victory. O come Morning Star, and comfort us. Turn our darkness to light. Save us, Emmanuel. Come, Lord. Come and shatter our expectations again. Amen.

*A simple question like, "Who is this story about?"
can help us rethink our expectations.*