

St. Paul's Halifax, December 23, 2007 (Advent IV)

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*May the birth of Christ disturb you.*

Today we lit the peace candle. It's a reminder to us that we anticipate the Peace that the birth of Christ brings to the world. Well, we'll celebrate His birth soon enough but our readings this week speak about Christ's conception. It is in the story of his conception that we get some foreshadowing of the kind of peace that he is to bring and that it may not be the kind of peace that we think. I read somewhere once about someone who received a Christmas card that read, "May the birth of Christ disturb you." At first glance this seems at odds with the spirit of the season. We are used to celebrating with great joy the birth of Immanuel, of God with us. We are used to celebrating, with great gladness the birth of the Prince of peace. I think there's more to it than that I think that there are indeed things about the coming of Messiah which should disturb us, disturb us in that it should make us think again about the things we take for granted, think again about what we view as the way things 'should' be. Our readings today can take us in many directions but there are two in particular that I want to explore this morning. The first is that Christ is a descendant of David and the second is how Joseph responds to the pregnancy of his betrothed.

St. Paul writes that he is a "slave" of Jesus Christ, and has been called by God to proclaim the Gospel of Christ, "the gospel concerning his [God's] Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh." Matthew also makes it clear that Joseph, who chose to become Christ's human father, was a "son of David." Both make it explicit that Jesus was of the lineage of David and therefore

fulfilled the prophecies of Scripture that Messiah was to be of the house of David. Matthew even goes so far as to present Joseph's lineage. If we look carefully at that lineage we see that it's not the kind of lineage that we might expect for Messiah. For one thing it includes four women, unusual in itself because lineages usually did not name women. Unusual also in that it includes not the ones we might expect, Sarah, Rebekah and Leah, but rather we find Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba. Tamar who prostituted herself with Judah (Genesis 38:15), Rahab was a prostitute in the city of Jericho (Joshua 2:1), Ruth a gentile, and Bathsheba, Uriah's wife with whom David committed adultery leading to the birth of Solomon. Not exactly the genteel and storybook lineage that we might expect is it? I think that the importance of making this lineage explicit is exactly because it shatters our notions of how and through whom God works. We are tempted to think that God works only through means that we think are right and proper, that conform to the ways that we think things should be.

But let's look at these women a little more closely. Tamar prostituted herself with Judah because she wanted to save herself from a life of desperate poverty and starvation because she was Judah's son's childless widow. Rahab saved herself and her family from certain death at the hands of Joshua's invading army by hiding the Israelites who had come to spy out Jericho's defences. Ruth was a gentile in a foreign land without means and without family who came to Boaz to save herself from marginalization and ultimately starvation. Bathsheba was a soldier's wife for whom it would have been very difficult or even impossible to resist the advances of the King. These were women in desperate situations, who acted to save themselves and their families because the rules and power

structures of that patriarchal society made their lives untenable. We might be tempted to judge them as unfit for the lineage of Messiah, just as we might judge the men who forced women by virtue of the rules of society to become prostitutes and who then slept with them, or to judge those who abused their power to force wives to commit adultery as unfit for the lineage of Messiah, but these are our human ways, they are not God's ways. This is not to say that prostitution, abuse of power and adultery are justified, they are not, they lead to violence and the destruction of our humanity. However; they were and continue to be a reality of human existence, broken and desperate as it is. And God chose to enter into our human life in that lineage, not the lineage of the perfect, of the obviously holy and pious, but the lineage of the unexpected, the lineage that includes the brave and faithful as well as the desperate and those whom we marginalize by our folly. God did not wait for us to be perfect by our human standards, if God had, God would still be waiting. Instead God chose to enter into this human life as God found it, broken and desperate. I think somehow that's what Matthew was trying to say by including Christ's oh so human lineage. Joseph was indeed a son of David, a son of a very human ancestry with all its warts exposed. It is this Joseph whom God chose to be the human father of Jesus.

Poor Joseph, he seems always to be stuck in the back of the manger scene, relegated to the role of an also ran. In Luke's Gospel Joseph is merely named as the man to whom Mary was betrothed. All the focus is on her and her obedience to God, "let it be with me according to your word." God is the primary actor here and Mary is entirely obedient to God's will. Mary is a virgin to fulfill the prophecy spoken by Isaiah, "Look the virgin (young woman) is with child and shall bear a

son and shall name him Immanuel” (Isaiah 7:14). She is also a virgin because we are to know that it is God who is acting here. It is God who is choosing to come among us. It says nothing about Joseph other than that he was a descendant of David and stayed with Mary. In Matthew’s Gospel we see the conception and birth of Christ from a different perspective. Joseph’s role in Matthew’s Gospel deserves a lot more attention than his place in our manger scenes would indicate. Joseph finds out that his betrothed is pregnant, but not by him. Being a righteous man, that is an adherent of Judaic law, he has no choice but to call off the wedding since she is guilty of fornication, to dismiss her, and according to the law, to allow her to be stoned to death at the gates of the town (Deut 22:23-24). But Joseph was a man of mercy because he planned to dismiss her “quietly” and thus attempt to spare her this fate. He planned to do this even before he had the dream in which the angel visited him and told him that her pregnancy was by the Holy Spirit. Following his dream, in which he is reminded of Isaiah’s words, Joseph acts and takes her to be his wife, to make Jesus his son and so to fulfill the prophecy that Messiah will come from the line of David. Joseph fulfills two of Matthew’s major gospel principles. First he is merciful by not dismissing Mary, Joseph therefore lives “in accordance with the principle [that], “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (Hos 6:6, Mat 9:13, 12:7).”<sup>1</sup> Joseph also **acts**, “because not everyone who says to me Lord, Lord, shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my father who is in heaven.” (Mat 7:21). So through his mercy and his courage to act, Joseph does the will of God and becomes Christ’s

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<sup>1</sup> Hare, D.R.A. *Matthew-Interpretation, A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*. (John Knox Press, Louisville, 1993): 9.

human father. He fulfills God's will by bringing Immanuel into the lineage of David. Again, not exactly storybook stuff is it? God chooses to reveal Godself in our humanity through an unwed teenage mother in a backwater town. God asks Joseph descended from a very human lineage, a lineage that does not conform to our human notions of perfection and respectability, to have the faith to believe that this is so, and the courage to act mercifully and courageously to become Christ's human father.

So what is the peace that we anticipate when we light this candle? Well, it is not the peace that is maintained by power. It's not the peace where the few impose their human notions of what is right and what is wrong on the many. It's not the peace where men have power over women or where powerful nations exploit and abuse weaker ones. It is not the peace of our comfortable society where some live in luxury because others live in abject poverty. It's not a peace that we as broken and desperate humanity can achieve by ourselves. I believe that it is the peace that comes through faith in the God who chose to enter and live in our humanity in all its courage and its faithfulness and in all its desperation and brokenness. I believe that it is the peace that comes through the courage to act mercifully, not to judge others by our human standards of what is right or how we think things ought to be, but always to strive to see how God sees. Not to judge the women in Joseph's lineage, not to judge the men in Joseph's lineage, but always to strive to see as God sees, to look toward the possibilities of the peace that comes by acting with the mercy and courage of Joseph.

May the birth of Christ indeed, disturb us.