

Text: Matthew 1: 18-25

Maybe you came this morning to celebrate Christmas; to celebrate the birth of the baby Jesus.

Maybe our arms are reaching out, ready to snuggle this little one.

But the scriptures assigned to us for today hold us back: not yet! In order to get to that manger, first we have to walk through the embarrassing gospel story that Matthew wants to tell.

What is the embarrassment?

We all enter this time together bringing other people with us, bringing the world's questions with us; surely they are also our questions too, if we are at all honest.

Some of you, I am sure have wondered yourself, or surely have been asked by friends or family or neighbours or your own children as they were growing up: how could a baby be born of a virgin? We have been taught about the birds and the bees; we know where babies come from.

Maybe that's the first embarrassment: Matthew's apparently shameless embracing of such a strange story. That's the embarrassment of looking at this story with 21st century eyes. It wouldn't have been a surprise in the first century; not because they weren't "scientific" but because the idea that great men were born without human father was a common idea. "It was assumed of many great men at the time, from Plato to Alexander, that they had been born w/o human father." (Schweizer, 33) To talk of a virgin birth was a way of saying: "this man is great." What Matthew is really saying is: "This person was given to the world by God."

But there is more embarrassment.

We need to know about 1st century Jewish marriage practice. A marriage had 2 steps: first the formal exchange of consent before witnesses, and then, about a year later, the taking of the bride to the groom's family home. The consent would constitute a legally ratified marriage, so that if she had sexual relations with someone else during the year between it would be considered adultery. It is clear where the embarrassment lies. As our story opens, Mary and Joseph are in that year between the 2 steps of marriage, and she is pregnant. The only plausible explanation is that she has been unfaithful. The story says that Joseph is a righteous man. What is a righteous man to do in such a situation? *If righteous means a strict obedience to the Law*, then (to follow Deut 22: 20-21), Mary should be public tried, and then stoned. Less strict observance would be divorce.

But in the Hebrew mind, "righteous" is never just about "following the law"; it is always about "doing justice to another's needs" (Eduard Schweizer, 54) It has to do with compassion. Joseph's righteousness is shown by his decision: "unwilling to expose Mary to public disgrace" Joseph made plans to divorce her without bringing charges against her.

BUT enter the angel, (are angels a little more acceptable to the 21st century mind than a virgin birth?)

The angel has other plans: that Joseph complete the marriage process, taking public responsibility for mother and child, and that he name the baby Jesus. According to Jewish law, when paternity is in doubt (as it will be in this case) the legal status of the child is determined by a man's willingness to take responsibility for the child, which is done by naming it. If a man says "this is my child" they are to be believed. Thus by obeying the angel's instructions, Joseph becomes the legal father of the child he did not engender.

The embarrassment is manifold:

1. The only thing that stands between this being a very prosaic story of adultery and it being a story of wonder and grace is the word of an angel in a dream.
2. According to Jewish practice, and by all outer appearance, Mary is regarded as "unrighteous", and Joseph is being asked to embrace an "unrighteous one."
3. Joseph is asked to take responsibility for something he didn't do and of which he had no part: he will become the object of public scrutiny and rumour as soon as the baby is born and people start doing their math.

Can you start to see the beauty of this story? And how it is the perfect story to prepare us to accept Jesus?

Have you ever covered for someone? Have you ever taken responsibility for something someone else did? Have you ever borne someone else's shame? That takes humility. It takes courage. It really becomes a form of death: death to your reputation; death to what people think of you. It is sacrificial love.

Do you see where we are heading?

Do you see how this story starts to create the path towards the cross?

Joseph's willingness to take responsibility for something he did not do stands as a stark reversal of the story of the garden, where neither Adam nor Eve wished to take responsibility for what they had actually done. And it is also a kind of prefiguring of what his now-legal son Jesus will do on the cross: allow his own life to be so knitted together with the lives of his community that he will be willing to become a scapegoat.

Joseph is asked to trust that the way of the Holy Spirit in this world has little to do with respectability!! And that pre-figures Jesus: Jesus was not respectable. Jesus ended up dying on the cross. We could say: Jesus ended up dying in a cell in Barton street jail.

And now we're getting closer to what was Matthew's real concern.

He is writing post-Jesus' death as criminal.

He is writing to try to convince people that the Jesus who died on the cross as an enemy of the state, along with 2 common criminals, is actually God's chosen one.

THAT is the embarrassment that Matthew is addressing.

Matthew is saying: this Jesus, scorned and rejected by all the upstanding, learned, respected leaders of our people, is actually of God; he is a son of David; he is the fulfillment of all the hopes of the prophets, and he saves us.

Matthew's message has to do with the name: "name him Jesus" for he will save his people from their sins. Jesus is Immanuel; God with us.

Maybe we think we have "solved" what was scandal to Matthew; maybe we think we can solve it with something like this: "The poor Jewish leaders had it all wrong; they are the "bad guys" who don't get it; God had it planned all along why Jesus would have to die. It's all ok in the end." Maybe we have this theory about what was happening on the cross, and why Jesus "had to die" that takes away the shame and scandal of Jesus. *It won't do. There is no theory that can take away the scandal.*

That scandal cannot be resolved but in our own willingness to do as Joseph did, to do as Jesus did, and immerse ourselves in the lives of our brothers and sisters.

The scandal of Jesus cannot be resolved but in our own hearts, acting in compassion, covering the sins of others, forgiving.

The embarrassment of Jesus cannot be resolved but in our own bodies, sitting in jail with those who are in jail, eating at table with those who have been scorned and rejected by men.

The embarrassment of Jesus cannot be resolved but in our willingness to give up respectability.

Until we are willing to find ourselves humiliated, judged, scape-goated for love's sake, Jesus will remain an embarrassment for us.

Until we ourselves discover the joy of being poor, the beauty of the humble, Jesus will remain an embarrassment for us.

When we are sitting in jail, when we learn the humility of being forgiven, and forgiving, then we will receive the blessed embarrassment of Jesus, and rejoice.

May we know that blessed embarrassment, and so be set free!!

Offered to the congregation of MacNab St Presbyterian Church, Hamilton, Ontario

By Rev Cathy Stewart

