

There tend to be stories connected to all of our births, as well as the births of our children, so it is that Matthew and Luke include stories of Jesus' birth. What is odd is that Mark and John do not, and Matthew summarizes the whole Incarnation of God in two verses. No stories about an Enrollment, a Stable or Manger in an over-crowded Bethlehem, no Shepherds or Glorias, just the dream of an Angel. Two Verses:

"This is how the birth came about: His mother Mary was betrothed to Joseph, but before they came together she was found to be pregnant through the Holy Spirit."

And later: ***"When Joseph woke from his dream, he did what the angel had commanded, taking her as his wife, but knowing her not until she gave birth; and he named him Jesus."***

I am told my mother had a large bowl of strawberries and ice cream before going to the hospital. The certificate lists exact time and place, and who was in the Delivery Room.

Our own children were born in the 1980s when father's tried to talk to the mother's belly so the baby would get accustomed to his voice, and we had birthing-suites instead of delivery rooms. Among those in our Lamaze Class, one couple were living in her parent's basement; the 2nd were building a house; the 3rd were unemployed; a 4th were coping with the death for their parents; and the Lindsey's moved states to begin a Call at a new Church, changing doctors at 9 months, such that I delivered our first-born. Stories...

The curiosities about Matthew's birthing stories begin with The Genealogy. Not that there is a Genealogy, Matthew was writing to Jews converting to Christianity who would have well known their Scriptures. Judaism underscored that the Messiah to come would be a Descendent of Abraham, and Descendent of David. The Messiah being a Descendent of Aaron, in the lineage of Priests comes through his mother Mary. Among the names of generations we did not recite this morning, there were 5 women named, which in Genealogies, especially in the 1st Century was unheard of, because women were legally only property. The stories of these 5 women were noteworthy because they were not Priestesses or Princesses, they were involved in "Scandalous acts of Righteousness": Conceiving a child by Incest, by Prostitution, Interracial marriage to a Canaanite or Moabite, Adultery, when according to the Levitical Law these relationships were not only immoral but illegal. Yet rather than "Scandalous Acts of Righteousness" the Bible calls these ACTS of FAITH, which we would call LOVE. Being an Un-Wed Mother by someone other than Joseph, Mary represents a 6th Scandalous Act. But 6 is not a number of Holy Completion, like the number 7 is.

Throughout the Bible, Numbers bear great Symbolism... There were 70 years of Captivity in Babylon; 40 years wandering in the wilderness; 40 days & nights in the Flood; 12 Sons of Jacob, 12 Tribes of Israel; 12 Disciples, 7 nights and days of Creation, and we know the Trinity. So it is not surprising that Matthew names there being 14 Generations from Abraham down to King David. 14 Generations from David through the 70 years in Babylon; 14 Generations from the Deportation in Babylon through the birth of Jesus... Except there are only 13. Listen again and count them with me. (MATTHEW 1: VERSES 12-16)

So who is the 14th Generation? Who are to be the Women representing the Holy Seventh Scandalous Act of Righteousness? We Are! Matthew's Gospel is written to involve us as Followers of Jesus!

Second, there is this business about RIGHTEOUSNESS, Joseph is identified as a Righteous Man. What does it mean to be Righteous? To be Right with God! Except, the Rule for what was considered Right & Wrong with God had throughout Judaism been The LEVITICAL LAW. The Law concerning Adultery, i.e. a woman as property of her husband becoming pregnant by someone other than her husband, did not just allow but REQUIRED STONING her and the one who had done this; or DIVORCE which was culturally taboo enough in America in generations before us, in the 1st Century in the Middle East, meant a life of prostitution, shunning by community & starvation. The LAW was concerned with the SHAME that was brought upon the Husband and upon the Community for allowing this to happen. SO those were the only two Legal Options for Joseph.

As to Mary being Joseph's wife or not, today we consider the decree of marriage being when the Minister declares you married, or when you sign the Marriage License, or 7 years, which ever comes first. In the Ancient Middle East, Marriage was established when the DOWRY was agreed upon and paid. The Bargain was completed when she came to live in her husband's home, rather than her father's. The Scandalous Act of Righteousness, is that instead of having Mary Stoned to Death, or Divorcing Her, Joseph chooses to trust her, to love her and takes MARY to be his wife.

For those in the Class on Angels: God has incredible resources at God's disposal, Prophets, Priests, Kings, All Creation with Earthquakes, Manna, Foreign Nations... But when God needs Really Heavy Lifting God uses Angels. I like to believe that when God needs TO WORK ALL THE ANGLES GOD USES ANGELS!

The third CURIOSITY about this story, is the reason this story of the Angel appearing to "Joseph in a Dream" in the first book of the New Testament, is connected with the Genealogy. In the Old Testament BIRTH STORIES fulfill the COVENANT, so who does the Bloodline come down through? Not MARY, but through JOSEPH! Yet, if Mary and Joseph did not consummate the relationship until after the baby was born, how is Jesus a son of Abraham and Son of David, fulfilling Genesis and the Prophecy of Isaiah? Everything is resolved in verse 25. In Ancient Judaism, you were Jewish only if your Mother had been Jewish to sing to you the ancient stories while you nursed as an infant; HOWEVER, the ACT of ADOPTION was completed when the Father Named the Child. And Joseph named the child the name JESUS.

The only connection I can make between these verses of Scripture and the Ordination and Installation of our New Elders and Deacons in this service of Worship might be in the final question we ask of all Ministers, Elders and Deacons:

"Will you seek to serve the people with ENERGY, INTELLIGENCE, IMAGINATION and LOVE?"

These are bizarre and outrageous times in which to be the Church. Old Testament Scholar Brueggemann called these DANGEROUS TIMES because everything we represent has become COUNTER-CULTURAL.

For over 50 years Churches of every stripe have been losing members faster than growing; Churches have been spending more than they received, and Non-Profit Missions have been spending more on administrative costs than to do Mission in the world. As your Pastor I am awed that we have been able to receive more new members than died or transferred; that we have been receiving more than we have been spending; and this year while we Budgeted \$95,000 for Missions; and you gave an additional \$93,000 through pass-through Mission Giving, so nearly double; we gave over \$78,500 more, through Special Offerings for Mission Concerns. SO I challenge you, neigh...

We Demand, that in these times we need you to lead us with Energy, Intelligence, Imagination and Love to boldly commit to SCANDALOUS ACTS of RIGHTEOUSNESS!