

Year A, Advent 4
December 18th, 2016
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Matthew 1:18-25

A Counter Story

“This is how the birth of Jesus Christ took place.” Notice the low key way the story of the birth of Jesus is announced. No trumpets, no fanfare, no frills—just the story itself. There is a reason for this. Jesus’ birth narrative in Matthew offers a counter story to Rome, to empire and all religion based on separating people into the good and the bad. That’s not to say this story didn’t really happen but that the way it happened has a deep meaning in history.

Because Year A in the lectionary focuses on Matthew, I think we will often be talking about empire and religion in the coming year. It should be interesting given where the world is right now. We still live in a time of empire. There couldn’t be a better time to be studying the Gospel According to Matthew.

“When Mary his mother was engaged to Joseph, before they were married, she became pregnant by the Holy Spirit.” Before she was married she became pregnant! Scandal! I don’t care who the father was, even if it was the Holy Spirit, if it was before marriage it is not right! She got pregnant by the Holy Spirit! Do you believe that?

Immediately we have to make a choice. Either his birth was conceived from outside the human political, rivalrous, dog-eat-dog world or we are being asked to believe something posterous, unbelievable, and certainly at odds with our experience.

Even Caesar whose birth was divine according to the Roman’s had two human parents. I wonder how the Roman’s worked out their theology on how Caesar became divine. I haven’t had time to look into that. Having only one human parent, the other being the Holy Spirit, Jesus appears to have a higher claim to divinity than Caesar. From the get-go the story offends Rome. Someone higher than Caesar who is non-violent and compassionate, how can that be!

But it doesn’t stop there. All the religious Jews also find fault. Mary got pregnant out of wedlock. By definition she is automatically impure and a sinner. How can she be the mother of anything but a bastard? The tension is set from his birth and gets played out finally at his crucifixion where both Rome and the religious leaders cooperate to have him executed.

The 3rd sentence introduces us to Joseph, Jesus’ step-father. He has every right to renounce his pregnant bride-to-be. Everyone would understand and support him. But Joseph was a gentle and non-condemning soul with a merciful heart toward Mary. The text says, “Because he didn’t want to humiliate her, he decided to call off their engagement quietly.” Humiliation can destroy souls and Joseph didn’t want to do that to Mary.

We come now to the fourth sentence. “As he was thinking about this, an angel from the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, ‘Joseph son of David, don’t be afraid to take Mary as your wife, because the child she carries was conceived by the Holy Spirit.’”

Here is an important aside before we can go on with our story. Rome had a heavy emphasis on fathers. Caesar was the supreme father, come from God and as the supreme father he had the right to do anything he wanted with his people. This belief in his preeminence went all the way down into every family where the father exercised powers similar to Caesars in his own family. Everyone had to live under male authority and even woman who were widowed were expected to quickly marry so that they would have a male to operate under. Can you see how this passage from Matthew cuts across this whole system of organizing the cosmos? Jesus' father isn't a male. It's the Holy Spirit. What gender is the Holy Spirit? Who knows? This story introduces a great deal of ambiguity into a black and white world.

In sentence five the angel speaking in Joseph's dream goes on, "She will give birth to a son, and you will call him Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." Now Joseph has a choice. Does he believe what he has heard in this dream, a dream that contradicts everything he thought he knew, or does he walk away and do what his culture has taught him to do and condemn Mary. Condemnation or compassion; exposing Mary to public shame or swallowing his pride and embracing her; what should he do?

Sentence six explains why we were told this intimate little story. The explanation also deepens the legitimacy of the story; something that has to be done if it is to stand a chance against the Roman Empire with its monopoly on propaganda and its hold on everyone's imagination. Everything in the world tells a different story than Matthews' and Rome claims there is no other story to compete with it. According to Rome, Rome, empire and religion tell the truth and there is no truth other than Rome's.

But Matthew's gospel begs to differ and says, "Now all of this took place so that what the Lord had spoken through the prophet would be fulfilled." We all know the prophet had spoken long before the birth of the Roman Empire. The prophet said: "Look! A virgin will become pregnant and give birth to a son, and they will call him, Emmanuel. Emmanuel means 'God with us.'" God with us, not against us like Caesar who sits in Rome, distant and uncaring. It's a counter story to empire.

Do we get that? "God with us," not against us! "God with us," not Lording it over us, not condemning us for falling short of some standard we can't reach! "God with us" as a human, weak and vulnerable, to bring peace and redemption; not judging us and pronouncing us "fired" for all eternity.

As we said Joseph has a decision to make. Does he believe his dream and act on it or does he dismiss it as some aberration that happens while sleeping. It's a decision we all must make.

"When Joseph woke up, he did just as an angel from God commanded and took Mary as his wife...Joseph called (the child) him Jesus.

Do you see how this is a counter story to Rome, empire and black and white religion? Do we believe it or dismiss it?