

Dec. 18, 2016
Matthew 1:18-25
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME
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God Grounded

INTRO to SCRIPTURE

As children learn Christmas carols, we are reminded that there are often unfamiliar words for them. One child, when asked to draw a picture of Christmas, drew a big round circle with a couple of eyes and a mouth. When asked about the drawing the child responded, "That's round John Virgin." Sounds a lot like 'round yon virgin to me. The word virgin plays an interesting role in today's scripture reading, which I'll explain in just a minute.

We've been listening to the prophet Isaiah during this Advent season. Isaiah, who lived several centuries before Jesus, challenges the people about their social injustice but also offers visions of hope for the future if they change their ways.

Today we will hear Isaiah quoted by Matthew as he tells of the birth of Jesus. However, in the quote from Isaiah a particular word is shifted from its original meaning in Hebrew as it is translated into Greek. The word in Hebrew means simply "young woman" but is translated into Greek as "virgin." Wouldn't you like to have a conversation with that translator or translation team? I'm pretty sure there were no women involved in that decision. Needless to say, this shift in translation has had significant consequences for the ways we talk not only about Jesus but also about human sexuality.

SERMON

You may have noticed the banner out front:
*Our faith is 2,000 years old
but our thinking is not.*

About 2,000 years ago Jesus of Nazareth was born. That event is a Mystery (with a capital M) that people have been pondering ever since.

In our Bible we have four gospels – each of which tell their own story about the life of Jesus. Their approaches to Christmas are quite different.

-Mark, the earliest written, says nothing about Jesus' birth.

-John, the last written, takes a philosophical approach -*In the beginning was the Word.*

Only Matthew and Luke tell Christmas stories as we think of them.

-Luke tells the story through Mary's eyes and includes shepherds and a heavenly host.

-Matthew, as we heard today, tells the story from the perspective of Joseph and goes on to tell of a star and magi.

The Bible makes no attempt to give us a definitive account of what "really happened" in the ways we think of today. The Bible seems to believe that truth is deeper than history itself.

What the gospels do agree on is that Jesus' presence in human history profoundly reformed the ways people of his time understood God and God's engagement with humanity.

Jesus' presence as an embodiment of Emmanuel – God with us – was a dramatic shift as an answer to the question, "Where is God?"

In biblical times people generally understood themselves to be living in a three-tiered universe.

- God was above in the heavens.
- People were on the earth.
- The dead were under the earth.

To biblical people the obvious answer to the question "Where is God?" is "up there." This understanding was deeply integrated into their religious imagery and their experience of life itself.

This understanding no longer speaks to us in the same way. We live in a very different perceptual universe. As someone in the study group said the other day, "What exactly is 'up' when you know you live on a sphere?" She suggested that maybe we should say 'out there'." Maybe. The imagination can take us in many directions.

Today's scripture reading suggests another possibility. Embedded in the Hebrew scriptures are glimpses of other ways of perceiving God – as Spirit, as Breath, as Presence. We hear this kind of mystical perspective in the quote from the prophet Isaiah.

In an "aha" moment, Matthew claims Isaiah's imagery to express his good news about Jesus. "Emmanuel" – God with us.

God on the ground - with us and among us. 20th century theologian Paul Tillich picks up on this when he calls God the Ground of all Being.

A grounded God is radical good news, especially for a hurting people. God is not far off but right here. Remember the story of the little boy who called out to his parents at night afraid of the dark. When they reminded him that God was with him, he replied, "But I want someone with skin on."

That's what Isaiah is talking about – not some God up in the heavens but God with skin on – grounded – right here with the people. This is good news for hurting people. In Isaiah's time, his people were hurting. In Jesus's time, his people were hurting. In our time, people are hurting.

Some of the hurts are communal – what about the people of Aleppo? How do we even get our heads around such tragedies?

Some of the hurts are very personal. Recently, I asked someone how they were doing in this season and the response was, "I'm just trying to get through." This comment was not about busyness but about layers of grief.

Never underestimate the power of kindness in this season. You may be the messenger of God on the ground to someone else, just as we hope that the stuffed animals we donated today will bring comfort to people in crisis. (We gave stuffed animals that we have been collecting in the crèche to local agencies who deal with children and adults in crisis.)

Christmas draws us away from our usual distractions and calls us to ponder the deeper mysteries of life and love. Such ponderings can be unsettling. But the angel always says, "Be not afraid." These words are both comfort and a call to awareness.. We need comfort because you can be pretty sure that what the angel has to say will leave us shaking in our boots. Angels also remind us that we need to pay attention. Fear generally keeps us shut down, but angels call us to a radical awareness.. Invariably God is much closer than we think.

Joseph came from a culture that kept God mostly up on the mountaintop – to be feared and revered – but at least at a safe distance. The angel that visits Joseph gives him the astonishing news that God is right in the midst of his family. Maybe that should give us all a different perspective on the people with whom we share our lives.

As many of you know, Ron and I and the Thompson-Westras had a grandson this fall. Caleb is a delight for all the extended families. So please indulge a new grandmother a very short story. The other day I heard him laugh out loud for the first time. It caught me by surprise and filled me with joy. I suspect Mary and Joseph felt just the same way when they first heard Jesus laugh.