

The Pleasing Strangeness of Advent

Matthew 1:18-25

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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Well, today is the official cut-off date for our upcoming 2023 Faith Questions sermon series. I ended up getting quite a few questions this year—probably the most of any of the six years we’ve been doing this.

There were several people who asked versions of the same question, so I combined as much as possible. But I still ended up with more questions than could fit in between Epiphany and Lent.

So, rather than cutting questions, I decided we would extend the series this year. We will do six questions in between Jan 8 and Feb 19, as planned. We’ll then take a break for Lent and Easter and resume the series after Easter Sunday.

I didn’t do this just to avoid having to make the hard decisions about which questions to cut and which to leave in. I did it because I think every question is important and I don’t want anyone to feel that their questions matter less than others.

Some of you know that I co-host a podcast with two other pastors in Mennonite Church Canada. Earlier this year, we were interviewing a guest who had started a kind of para-church organization for those who were disaffected with church.

At one point, our guest said something like, “Some people are just frustrated because the church isn’t a safe place to ask hard questions.

I said, “Well, our church is.” I explained that we do this series every year where the congregation’s questions dictate the preaching agenda.

And the guest and my co-hosts were genuinely surprised. And intrigued. And then we spent about five minutes on the podcast talking about how this works in our church.

I have to say it was nice to be able to say that our congregation was a safe place to ask questions. I might even have felt a twinge of unholy pride (for which I immediately repented).

This will be the sixth year that we have done this. As I've reflected on it this year, it occurs to me again that the value of this series is not necessarily that the preacher stands up at the front and pronounces the final word on difficult questions about faith and life, but that we at least in *some* sense create a space wrestle with these questions together.

So, I have an outline of topics and dates pretty much finalized which I will get out by email either next week or in early January.

Ok, moving on. We've reached the last Sunday of Advent where our overarching theme of the season has been the promise of restoration. God's is a restoration project that involves all of creation, from the cosmic right down to the personal.

It is a restoration project that God accomplishes *for* creation and at the same time one which involves ordinary human beings. We're not just passive spectators but active participants.

This Sunday, we encounter the story of Joseph and the role he played in the story of Christmas.

Like so many things in the story we rehearse each year during the Advent and Christmas seasons, Joseph's is a story of responding to the God who surprises, the God who does not act in expected ways.

This happens a lot in Scripture. God regularly confounds, disrupts, confuses, shocks, doesn't play by the rules, doesn't act according to the script.

From Cain to Abraham to Moses to the unlikely king David to Hosea to Peter and Paul and other examples too numerous even to mention, this is a thread that runs throughout the narrative of Scripture.

God is love and sometimes love moves in mysterious ways (to steal a line from one of my favourite U2 songs.)

As Christmas draws near—this year, in particular—I have found myself being grateful for and drawn to the God who surprises.

I think we are losing the capacity to be surprised—by each other, by the world around us, by God. Too often, we assume we know the story—whether it’s a story in the newspaper or the story of a human life—without letting the story come to us on its own terms.

This week I came across an article by Amanda Fortini called “Real Life Does Not Fit the Narrative.”¹ I read it after reading the gospel text for the week.

I was struck by a few passages. Here’s what she says:

When I teach college journalism classes, I tell my students to go out and report on events as they unfold, letting their stories arise from whatever they find, while ignoring the expectations or preconceived notions they had at the start. **The real world, I tell these impressionable young writers, is always more fascinating than the ideas we hold about it.** Reality, truth, the bizarre behavior of people in the wild—they will always surprise you.

In our current media climate, where facts are subordinated to various master narratives, and everything is viewed through an ideological lens, my advice might seem obsolete, I realize. For a while now, on broadcast news, in magazines and newspapers—and certainly in “content” that goes viral on social media—there is a conspicuously growing lack of stories that are complex, surprising, and seemingly told for their own sake.

My root objection to these fictions isn’t about politics or even ethics, purely; it’s one of aesthetics. Not only are these narratives untrue, they’re also uninspired and formulaic. They feel engineered with a takeaway in mind, assembled from a kit—with a moral, a villain, and a hero. **They lack the pleasing strangeness of reality...** As you consume them, there’s no sense of discovery or revelation. I find them pat, predictable, deadening. They bore me.

¹ <https://www.thefp.com/p/real-life-does-not-fit-the-narrative>

I think she is right about this. I have long found myself drawn to stories that break out of the shackles of the predictable. I have long felt like *actual* people and *actual* stories are often way more complex than the ways we tell them.

Fortini goes on:

[M]ost stories are not tidy parables with morals. [Annie Dillard once said] **“The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright.”** A satisfying true story tends to be complicated and irreducible. Reality is messy.

Oh boy.

“The world is wilder than that in all directions, more dangerous and bitter, more extravagant and bright.”

“Reality is messy.”

Amanda Fortini’s article is about journalism and about telling the truth even when (or especially when) the truth is complicated, but you could hardly find a better description of the story that we tell each year at Christmas time.

It is wild in all directions. It is dangerous. It is extravagant and it is bright. It is the story of the true light coming the world in the most unlikely of ways.

Our text today focuses on Joseph.

This image comes from the 2022-23 Christian Seasons Calendar, which I order each year from the University Hill Congregation in Vancouver.

It tells time according to the Christian calendar, and this was the image chosen for Advent this year. It is a piece called “Joseph’s Dream” by Denise Gracias. Not only did it obviously connect with the passage, but it gave me an opportunity to test out our new monitor on the back wall!

It is a triptych, I learned, which is “a work of art that is divided into three sections. These were often used “to present a narrative, create a sequence, or show different elements of the same subject matter,” according to one definition I found.

I don't claim to be the greatest interpreter of art, but I still like it. This one is meant to convey the three dreams Joseph had, one informing him of the nature of Mary's pregnancy (today's text), the other two telling him to flee to and then return from Egypt.

At any rate, if you find yourself nodding off during the rest of my sermon, you can try to exegete this painting.

Joseph seems to have been a fairly ordinary Jewish man looking forward to a fairly ordinary life. Predictable. Safe. My sense is that Joseph was the kind of guy who stayed in his lane.

But he was suddenly thrust into an extraordinary story that would require choices that he could have never imagined having to make.

Mary and Joseph are engaged to be married (in first century Jewish culture this would have been at least a one-year period), when Mary is discovered to be pregnant.

Conventional wisdom at this point in this culture would have been rather simple.

Divorce. Mary had obviously been unfaithful. The wedding would obviously be called off. Joseph owed her nothing.

Mary's fate, if the letter of the law about adultery were to be observed, would be even more grim. In Deuteronomy and Leviticus, the prescribed punishment is stoning.

But even *before* Joseph learns the truth about Mary's pregnancy, he resolves to take an unconventional path.

Verse 19 says that Joseph was a righteous man and decided to divorce her quietly to spare her the public scorn and disgrace that were undoubtedly coming her way, as an unwed, pregnant Jewish teenage girl.

We might ponder the fact that Joseph is described as “righteous” for refusing to go along with the Mosaic law, but that's another sermon.

After Joseph resolves to pursue this course, the angel appears, telling him not to be afraid, to take Mary as his wife, for the child is from the Holy Spirit.

The angel tells Joseph to name him “Jesus” (Hebrew *Yeshua* or “Joshua,” which means “Yahweh saves”).

Matthew links this to the prophecy from Isaiah: the virgin shall conceive a son and call him Emmanuel, which means ‘God is with us.’

God with us. The hope of Christmas.

The incarnation—God taking on human flesh in Jesus—is and has been a source of enormous comfort and consolation to Christians for the past two thousand years.

A God who would enter our experience, who would take on our flesh, who would understand what it means to be human on a deep and personal level—this is good news.

But there is more to “with” than comfort and consolation. Here, again, the story is wilder and messier than we might prefer.

Jesus doesn’t enter the world simply to comfort. Joseph would come to know this very well.

“God with us,” for Joseph, meant being thrust into the middle of a scandal. It meant spending the rest of his days being known as, “Jesus’ father, or so it was thought...” (Luke 3:23).

One commentator on this passage put it beautifully:

In choosing Joseph to be Jesus’s earthly father, God led a “righteous” man with an impeccable reputation straight into doubt, shame, scandal, and controversy. God’s call required Joseph to reorder everything he thought he knew about fairness, justice, goodness, and purity. It required him to become the talk of the town—and not in a good way. It required him to embrace a mess he had not created. To love a woman whose story he didn’t understand, to protect a baby he didn’t father, to accept an heir who was not his son.

In other words, God’s messy plan of salvation required Joseph—a quiet, cautious, status quo kind of guy—to choose precisely what he feared and dreaded most. The fraught, the complicated, the suspicious, and the inexplicable. So much for living a well-ordered life.²

These are not words we tend to associate with Christmas.

I doubt anyone expects to receive a card this season wishing them a “fraught and complicated Christmas.”

“God with us” was and is good news, certainly,

But “with” is a wild word. It also meant a young couple running for their lives as refugees not long after this baby boy of promise was born.

For Mary, “with” would mean that, as Simeon predicted, a sword would pierce her soul—the baby boy who was Emmanuel would one day make her weep as he hung on a Roman cross.

And for Joseph, “with” would look like a parental relationship that began in scandal and included an adopted baby boy who would probably always be a bit of an enigma to him.

Messy. Wild. Strange. And yet gloriously full of hope.

You shall name him Jesus because he will save his people from their sins (Mat. 1:21).

Even if he will do it in a way that nobody could have anticipated.

The hopes and fears of all the years are indeed met in Jesus Christ. But we must never allow this story to become too predictable, prosaic, too Hallmark-y.

It is a wild and messy and disruptive story. It is a story that was barely believable even for those in the middle of it.

² <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=2484>

It is story that has a “pleasing strangeness” that bursts through all pre-existing categories and tidy narratives about who God is, about what God wants, about how God works in the world.

The same God is alive and active in our world today. I have been struck in a new way, this Advent season, by how often God seems to be thrusting me into unexpected conversations in unexpected places with people I could never have predicted.

I believe the same is true for each one of us. God comes to us again and again and again, in weird and wonderful ways, inviting us to be active participants in the restoration project of the cosmos.

So, in the midst of all the lights and the songs and the family gatherings and the meals and the celebrations, let’s also remain open to the God who confounds our categories, who disrupts, unsettles, reorients, and saves.

On this last Sunday of Advent, as Christmas draws near, I want to leave you with the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. This is from his little book of Advent devotionals and is called “Look Up, Your Redemption is Drawing Near”:

“Look up and raise your heads” (Luke 21:28).

Advent creates people, new people. We too are supposed to become new people in Advent. Look up, you whose gaze is fixed on this earth, who are spellbound by the little events and changes on the face of the earth. Look up to these words, you who have turned away from heaven disappointed. Look up, you whose eyes are heavy with tears and... Look up, you who are burdened with guilt, cannot lift your eyes. Look up, your redemption is drawing near.

Something different from what you see daily will happen. Just be aware, be watchful, wait just another short moment. Wait and something quite new will break over you: God will come.³

Maranatha. Come Lord Jesus. Amen.

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *God is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 40-41.

