

“The Christmas Scandal”

Isaiah 9:2-7 • Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:8-12
First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 6, 2020

This morning I need to tell you that there has been a major scandal and a cover-up that reaches to the highest levels of government, media, education, and even religion. I know you're probably tired of hearing about scandals. It seems that the news media tries to make everything into a major scandal these days. But this one is really important and the cover-up has been very effective. The scandal is *Christmas*.

Christmas has always been my favorite time of year. I love the decorations and the lights and I enjoy making and especially eating all of the goodies that we enjoy during the holidays. For most of us, Christmas makes us feel good. We have the image in our minds of a perfect Christmas, with chestnuts roasting on an open fire, while the snow gently falls outside the window, and of course we're together with our families. That's the cover-up. And you have been part of it.

We have painted in our mind this picture of the ideal Christmas. We tend to have a sentimental view of Christmas as Jesus' birthday party. Let me just say that if that's the case, we have missed the true meaning of Christmas. The real meaning of Christmas is not a warm fuzzy feeling. The real meaning of Christmas is a shocking scandal and it's even offensive to some people.

Part of the problem is that the Christmas story is so familiar to us that we are no longer shocked by it. We have domesticated the story. When we hear about Mary and Joseph, about the baby Jesus in the manger, when we read about the angels and the shepherds and the wise men, we tend to think of our nativity sets that are picture perfect and always peaceful. But that's not reality. Christmas is a scandal. So let's look at some of the ways that the Christmas story was a shocking scandal to its original readers but also to us today.

The scandal begins with the very beginning of the gospel of Matthew. We don't usually read

the beginning of Matthew 1. It seems like just a list of names. We know they're all important but in the way that legal documents or county property records are important. But the genealogy of Jesus is filled with scandal. Abraham was the father of Isaac. But only after he'd had a child with his housekeeper. Isaac was the father of Jacob but he liked Esau better and made sure everybody knew it. Jacob, who tricked his brother into giving up his birthright and tricked his father into blessing him, was the father of Judah and his brothers. Judah was the father of Perez and Zerah by his daughter-in-law Tamar because she tricked him into thinking she was a prostitute. Boaz' mother, Rahab, actually WAS a prostitute and Boaz went on to marry Ruth, a foreigner. And King David was the father of Solomon with another man's wife, whom he ordered to be sent to the front lines of the battle while everyone else stepped back.

This is how Matthew begins his account of the life and ministry of Jesus. The scandals continue in our passage from Matthew 1: “Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.”

This was a HUGE scandal in the ancient world. In the U.S. these days over 40% of babies are born to an unmarried mother. But in ancient Israel this was unheard of. Not only was it socially inappropriate but adultery was a crime. Since women had few rights back then, she was primarily responsible and the penalty for adultery was death, usually by stoning.

This is what it means that Joseph was “unwilling to put her to shame.” He did not want Mary to be put to death. That means it was also a scandal that Joseph married Mary anyway. But this is also evidence to support the truth of the Bible. If you were going to make up a story about the central person in your religion, you certainly would not have the story begin with such

scandalous events as being born out of wedlock to poor, working-class parents from a nowhere town called Nazareth. In fact, in John 1, after Philip meets Jesus he goes to get Nathaniel who replies, “can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

You also probably wouldn’t have God’s son, the savior of the world, born in a barn full of animals. Surely He deserves better than that, right? You wouldn’t have him sleeping in a food trough, either. That’s about as humiliating a birth as possible. Luke tells us that Mary wrapped Jesus in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn. Actually, it wasn’t an inn like you and I think of. The word translated here as inn is better translated as “upper room.” It’s the same word used for the upper room where Jesus celebrates the Last Supper with his disciples.

Houses at that time were 2-story. The family lived on the second floor and the first floor was where the animals were kept. The scandal is that there was no room upstairs with the rest of the family for the savior of the world.

The third major scandal in the Christmas story is that the angel announces Jesus’ birth to a group of shepherds. In fact, they are the only humans to be told of the birth. Dirty, smelly shepherds. These were people who had very few people skills. They spent day and night with their sheep and so had very little human contact.

Shepherds at the time were outcasts. They were not really welcome in many places and because they travelled from place to place people didn’t trust them. They were considered “unclean” and so were not permitted in the Temple. Shepherds were also not permitted to give testimony in legal proceedings. The Talmud, which is like an ancient commentary on God’s law, says, “no help is to be given to heathens or to shepherds.” As people, shepherds had little value to the society of the time.

But they had tremendous value to God. So instead of announcing the birth of the messiah to kings or priests, God chooses the people that the world rejects. We need to keep that in mind

when we are tempted to think that we don’t matter to anyone. We matter to God and if we are willing to let Him, He will use us to do amazing things for His kingdom. But it’s also a warning to us, that if we think we are more important than we really are, we may miss the surprising good news.

And that leads me to the biggest scandal of the Christmas story. In our reading from Matthew, the angel tells Joseph, “do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” (The name Jesus means “he saves). All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: “Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel” (which means, God with us)”

The biggest, most shocking scandal in these Christmas passages is that the God who created everything around us, the God who continues to be actively involved in every detail of the universe, this God set aside His glory and came to earth as a human. Not just looking like a human, he came as a real person named Jesus.

It turns out that this is the scandal that Muslims can’t get past. They cannot accept the idea that a holy God could or even would become human. This is the scandal that separates Christianity from every other world religion.

But not only did God become human, He came as a helpless infant, dependent on Mary and Joseph for his physical needs, just like all other babies. The rest of the story is that Jesus grew up obedient to Mary and Joseph, that he ministered to people that society had thrown away – tax collectors, prostitutes, criminals, liars and gossips. Jesus, the God-man was arrested, tried and convicted of crimes he didn’t commit, and crucified on a cross, died and was buried. Then he did what no one else in history has done, he walked out of the tomb alive again three days later.

There's one more aspect of this that is shocking to us – the reason *why* he came here. Jesus was born because you and I are sinners. We have made a mess of our lives and offended God. But He loves us so much that He was unwilling to leave us that way. That's why He was born, to rescue us from ourselves and restore our relationship with God. Like the shepherds, we don't deserve it. But that's the point. That's what grace is all about.

So what about you? Will you respond like the shepherds and “go and see this thing that has happened?” This Christmas, as you unwrap presents and spend time with your family, also spend some time reflecting on the true meaning of Christmas. Be shocked at the scandal that God loves you this much.

Amen.