

Scandal and Salvation

The gospel today is all about women who are neck deep in scandal.

And if the degree of scandal is measured by the juiciness of the gossip it creates, then we've got quite a story to tell!

Imagine what the National Enquirer might do with this stuff!

Elizabeth is a retiree, child bearing years long gone!

Mary is a teenager, at the most 15 or 16 years old the scholars tell us.

And both of them are in a condition that neither of them should be in.

Carrying new life in their wombs.

One in an unmarried womb in a culture that stones such women to death.

The other in a womb that was packed up and moving into the Shady Pines Retirement Home.

And yet, here they are.

Both women, the youngster and the old timer, as pregnant as pregnant can be.

Imagine the scandal!

Imagine the gossip!

No wonder the angel tells Mary: "Don't be afraid!"

It's probably not the angel she's most afraid of!

What's most frightening are things like:

"What will the neighbors say?"

"What will my parents say?"

"What will my poor fiancé Joseph say?"

But scandal, it seems, is the lifeblood of the long story between God and humanity.

Scandal weaves its way through the genealogies, the bloodline of Jesus, that both Matthew and Luke give to us.

And like today's gospel, the most fascinating people in these genealogies are the women.

We've heard some of their stories before.

But they're worth remembering again.

Because we so easily forget how God uses what we call weakness or sin or loss and transforms these things into something that is marvelous to behold!

Like Tamar!

A daughter-in-law who decides to get even with her lying father-in-law by disguising herself as a prostitute.

She sleeps with that father-in-law and then gives birth to twins.

One of whom is a direct great great granddaddy of Jesus!

Like Ruth, the illegal immigrant from Moab.

She has pre-marital sex on the barnyard floor.

She gets pregnant with the child who is destined to become the granddaddy of King David.

Like Bathsheba, whom that same King David spies taking a tub on her roof top in all of her naked beauty.

Who is widowed because David schemes to have her husband killed in battle.

And she eventually gives birth to the child who will grow up to become wise old King Solomon.

And here we are today with Mary.

The newly pregnant teenager.

And Elizabeth, whose child is kicking for joy in her no longer retired womb.

These amazing women meet together not in shame or fear, but with amazement and wonder at the sheer audacity of God!

And they can kick up their heels and sing songs of God lifting up the lowly and telling the rich that their good times are over — because they are both squarely within the bloodline of the savior.

Which thankfully is not a line up of the pious and squeaky clean.

It is instead a long story of creative, sometimes cunning, sometimes brave, and always alive to life women, who are immersed in the complexity and uncertainty of our daily existence.

This bloodline might be enough of a story, to simply marvel at how God brings salvation through the muck and mire of our messy human lives.

How God writes straight with the crooked lines we so often draw.

But the story doesn't end there.

In fact it just scratches the surface of the real scandal that God is hatching.

A scandal that begins in the origin of all that is.

"So let's take a closer look.

Let's go back, all the way to the beginning.

And we shall see an even greater scandal.

Let's return to Genesis.

In the very beginning, the Spirit of God hovers over the waters of chaos.

And God creates light and dark.

Oceans and sky.

Land and crops and animals.

And finally Adam, the Hebrew name for "human."

We are given a paradise to enjoy.

With all of our needs met.

A veritable heaven on earth.

There's only one rule.

"Stay away from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil.

Because, God warns, "you aren't equipped to know one from the other.

Or to grasp how truly hard it is to tell which is which.

And if you try, if you go there, why, you only invite a life of misery."

So of course we go there!

And of course we try to this very day to say what is good and who is evil.

All the while creating a mess out of this world because we almost never get it right.

This is the root of our current political nightmare.

Of polarized parties and tribal warfare.

Even now in the 21st century.

It is the root of so many family disputes.

Where choices made and roads taken often lead to judgments based on preconceived and socially acceptable notions of how things "ought to be."

Rather than trusting in God's often odd, sometimes even bizarre, ways of moving each of us closer to God's truth.

We forget, to our peril, God's admonition that "my ways are not your ways."

And so we bring down on ourselves brokenness.

And toil.

And death.

And part of that brokenness comes to Eve, the mother of humanity:

"You will have pain in pregnancy and childbirth," because the knowledge of good and evil is full of pain.

The miracle of life, the gift of sexual intimacy and the invitation to create, now it all comes with a price.

In fact, until only recently in developed countries, and still in many developing countries, the leading cause of death among women is child birth.

So what is the scandal?

It is this.

That the God who broods over the waters of chaos at the dawn of creation now broods over the waters of a young girl's womb.

The God who chooses to create the cosmos with the magnificent words "Let there be.....!" now chooses to become a mere embryo.

A zygote.

A mass of dividing cells in a human uterus.

So that we might be re-created.

In the face of our love affair with military might and national security, in the face of our adoration of wealth and power and celebrity, "God comes into the world as a baby.

Naked and needy.

That's the way the Christian story goes.

And maybe it's not all that comfortable for us.

God doesn't come into the world in a display of how we define power and glory, with noise and rockets.

But God enters the world weak and hungry.

Totally dependent on his mother.

A simple, teenage, girl." D. Blue, From Stone to Living Water, 121, paraphrased.

Unlike the days of Noah, God doesn't throw up his hands and start over in the face of our stubborn intent to do it all "my way."

No.

In Jesus, God reaches all the way back to the very first scandal.

The scandal that mars every human life.

Right from the womb.

From childbirth.

Every time new life is welcomed on the earth.

In Jesus, it's not only "God with us" but God "as one of us."

Who heals, redeems, restores.

It is the final fix for all of humanity.

As we have reflected this entire Advent season, we cannot save ourselves.

There is in our nature something that has gone wrong.

Something we cannot fix on our own.

Something that insists on saying "No!" to God.

But in the incarnation, in this miracle of God becoming human, God rejects our NO.

Replacing it forever with God's YES.

To everyone.

And therein lies the true scandal of God.

That no matter who you are or what you have done, no matter how lost you feel, no matter how hopeless things seem to be, you are loved.

You are embraced.

You are accepted.

By the One who makes all things new.

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