

"Scandal of the Gospel"

The Fourth Sunday in Advent
2005
The Reverend John H. Brock
Church

Saturday, December 17,
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

Grace to you and peace, from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

Well it is getting close to Christmas and so that means among other things there are some of our homebound people that I go out to see to make sure that they are able to celebrate our Lord's supper, because they probably are not going to be able to be here in time or for any of the celebrations, the times of worship, on Christmas weekend. And so as I was visiting one of our folks this last week, one of our older couples, the wives ask me how did I feel about this "Merry Christmas" vs. the "Happy Holidays" controversy that is going on? I tried to be gracious, because one of the things that I learned about myself this last summer, something that I learned that I am not necessarily all that proud of, I learned that I am a very sarcastic person. And I know that sarcasm can be very cruel and cutting, and so I have to be, especially with parishioners, I need to be very careful of what I am saying. And so I was striving to be not sarcastic. Another thing you need to know is that I grew up in the suburbs of Chicago. I grew up in a very diverse community. We had the Italians, the Germans, and the Polish, and the Irish, and the Greeks, those of Jewish faith, and we're all living with those folks from Mexico and those folks from Puerto Rico. I grew up in a rather diverse multi-cultural society.

The couple that I was meeting with were both born and raised in central Pennsylvania, and there is nothing wrong with central Pennsylvania. See I have to be very careful of what I am about to say here. Because there is nothing wrong with being born and raised in central Pennsylvania, but as I was talking with this older couple, both of whom are well in their eighties, and realizing as we talked, that the folks with whom they grew up were a whole lot different than the folks with whom I grew up. They grew up with folks very much like themselves, and that is fine. They weren't exposed to a lot of the other holidays, a lot of the other celebrations in the manner that in the suburbs of Chicago I grew up with.

And so we talked a little bit about some of these other holidays that are celebrated at this time of year. Not only are we celebrating Christmas, but we often time Hanukkah, the Jewish celebration of lights, happens at this time. The African celebration of Kwanzaa happens from December 26 until January 2. Many and different holidays are going on and so I grew up in a culture where we said "Season's Greetings" to you, and we said "Happy Holidays," because you didn't always know what holiday, what Holy day the person to whom your talking to may be celebrating. And so I am not all that offended if someone says to me "Season's Greetings" or "Happy Holidays." I would also rejoice if they said "Merry Christmas." It is not that important to me, but I understand to some folks it is. It is a biting point; it is a sticking point to them. Now I was trying very much to not clash with these folks, because I love them dearly and I have seen witness of their Christian faith and I have

heard stories of how well these two folks have served our congregation. And I do know that they are fine strong loving Christian people. But here I was talking with them, clashing with what they had grown up with. With things that they had KNOWN for almost their entire lives. And I was trying to not clash with her, but realizing that my upbringing was different from hers.

Clashing is one of those things that we have heard tonight in our scripture. In the story from Samuel of David wanting to build the temple to the Lord and God saying, “no David, that is not for you to do.” We have clashing as well in the story of Mary. With the story of Mary, perhaps it is not quite as obvious, or maybe we’re clashing in that story of Mary in ways that the original hearers might not have understood. Because for us, when we hear the story of Mary and when we remember that this is a young woman of fourteen, maybe sixteen years of age, who is pregnant and not married. I think what clashes with most of our thinking is the fact that she’s fourteen to sixteen years old. Being unmarried gets in there, but the fourteen to sixteen-year-old part is what gets us. Now I do have to say that in the three years that I have been here at Trinity, I have only had TWO weddings where the couple was not already living together. And in the seven years that I have been ordained, I have had several weddings where the couple had their children be part of the marriage ceremony. But for us, it might be her age, but for the people of the first century, for the people of the time when Mary got pregnant, what clashed with their faith was not her age, because that was normal marrying age. No, what clashed for them was the fact that she was not yet legally married.

Clashing and it happens in our scripture. We even get that a little bit with the conversation that Mary has with the Angel that appears. Over and over again throughout our scripture, any time an angel appears face to face, person to person with a human being, that individual, what’s the first words out of an angel’s mouth? We heard it tonight, “Don’t be afraid.” Why does the angel say this? The only conclusion that I have been able to come up with is when I read scripture is that ANGELS ARE PRETTY doggone scary critters. Every time they show up the first words out of their mouth is “Don’t be afraid” and then the next verse is usually, “but the people are terrified anyway.” But that didn’t happen with Mary. Did you catch that? Mary is unique in scripture because she is the only face to face encounter with an identified angel where she is not terrified. She’s perplexed it says, yes, she’s perplexed and “pondered what sort of greeting this might be,” or in a different translation, she wondered what was being a greeting like that, because the angel says to her “Greetings O favored one of God.”

A little earlier, we didn’t have it in our lesson tonight, but a little earlier in Luke’s gospel at the beginning of Chapter 1 the angel encounters Zachariah, John the baptizer’s father. He encounters Zachariah in the temple and the first words out of the angel’s mouth, “Don’t be afraid,” what happens, Zachariah’s terrified anyway. But the angel tells Zachariah, Zachariah and his wife Elisabeth are well beyond child bearing years, but the angel tell Zachariah, your wife is going to conceive, she’s going to have a child, who of course becomes John. But Zachariah doesn’t believe this, he doubts what the angel has said and so Zachariah becomes mute until his son John is born. Mary doesn’t question, she ponders what this means and is perplexed about the greeting. And it is more, when I look at the Greek and study it, it’s more just trying to figure out the mechanics. You are going to conceive and have a child and she doesn’t quite understand this and she asks, “How can this be because I do not yet know a male?” But the angel replies, in a sentence that would

drive an English major nuts, “with God, every word will not be impossible.” The double negative in the Greek helps to emphasize how God can do amazing things.

I think though that today we still tend to struggle with that Mary was the fourteen to sixteen-year-old, more so than the unwed part. But regardless, of which part of the story we clash with, all humans clash with that story if it's the first century or the 21st century.

So in your own life, in your own faith, what is clashing for you? What are the things that you are struggling with, especially this holiday, especially this “Holy day”? What are the things in your faith life that are causing you to pause, that make you question, that produces in you a struggle with your faith life? Maybe it's the whole question of Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas. Maybe it's how did God make this young woman pregnant? Maybe it's how could God be allowing us to be at war, or how can there be terrorists doing evil things in the name of their god. I am sure you are struggling with something, but it is GOOD to struggle. For in that struggling with our faith, in that struggling with these questions, that is what helps our faith to grow. Because faith isn't a once and done kind of a deal. In the gospel within Mary's own story we continue to get stories from Mary's point of view where she continues to be perplexed and ponders these things in her heart.

It doesn't necessarily get any easier simply because you're a pastor either. Just last week I met with a student from Messiah College and tried to explain to her our Lutheran Style of worship, and she happened to be here the week before and when Pastor Hardy was at the 10:45 service and had a baptism. And so we were talking about our Lutheran point of view of baptism and so her first question was, well what would we say as Christians who worship in the Lutheran tradition, is baptism the same as salvation? Well no it's not, because salvation is what Christ did for us on the cross and being raised from the dead. Well why then, she asked, why did it sound within our Lutheran liturgy, why did it sound as though baptism is the same as salvation? And I had to struggle to come up with an answer for her. To explain it in terms that she could understand and to explain it in terms that I could understand. Because as I sat and I thought about it as I looked at the words, it sure comes across that way. But we would not say that baptism saves us, no it IS Christ that saves us. Baptism is that visible sign that we are saved, but I had to struggle with that.

We have example from Mary herself, that we don't just believe and then simply turn off our minds. All of us, all of us as believers, regardless of what denomination we might have been raised in, regardless of where we are in our faith journey, all of us are allowed to “ponder in our hearts” the way that Mary did. What the words mean to us and how faith is important to us. How faith is important, to me.

That's the point that I tried to leave with those folks with whom I visited last week. That our faith is a constantly growing, changing, developing, living thing within us, within each of us. And that if we as fellow believers clash with each other over silly things, like Happy Holidays or Merry Christmas, we need to know and we need to remember that Christ is with us regardless of which of those things we might say. Because like Mary, after her encounter with Gabriel, Christ lives inside each of us. Not on some greeting card.

Amen.

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