

Emmanuel

The incarnation, God becoming a human being, is all about scandal. Scandal for the moralistic finger waggers.

This child was born out of wedlock. Poor Joseph had a pregnant fiancée and hadn't even slept with her. An unwed teen, in a very small town. What will the neighbors say?

There is more scandal. The bloodline of important people is an important thing. It should track only the best and the brightest. Not so for the bloodline of Jesus.

Just before our reading today, Matthew runs through the generations that lead to Jesus. Four of them are women. Tamar is the first. She was married to Judah's son. You know who Judah is; one of the twelve sons of Jacob, later known as Israel. His children's names are the names of the twelve tribes of Israel.

Tamar married Judah's eldest son. He died. So, she married the next son, as was her right under Jewish law. He died too. She then asked for the third and last son. Judah stalled. He'd had enough dead sons, thank you very much. So Tamar dressed up as a prostitute, solicited her father in law (that would be Judah), got pregnant by her father in law, and gave birth to twins: one of whom turns out to be the great grandfather of Israel's top King, King David.

Next is Ramah, a prostitute who used her trade to seduce and then kill an enemy general, allowing the Jewish people to take control of the Holy Land.

The third woman in the genealogy is Bathsheba. She was taking a rooftop bath, in her birthday suit of course, when King David peered over his lanai and saw her. He drooled. Problem is, she's married. And not only married, but married to David's most loyal soldier. What is David to do?

He sends his loyal soldier, Bathsheba's husband, to the front lines. So sad. He's killed! David takes the widow as his wife. Eventually, she has a son, who eventually becomes King Solomon, the wisest of Israel's Kings.

There is scandal in the bloodline and scandal in the birth. And there is more scandal.

Scandal this time for those who say religion and politics don't mix. Scandal for those who say, "keep your religion private and to yourself," for those who say "mind your rulers," "obey your government," "protect the status quo."

Matthew's story of the birth of Jesus is a scandal to all of that. Matthew isn't writing a cute Hallmark card when he tells the story of the birth of Jesus. He's writing treason. He's writing high sedition. "In the time of King Herod," he writes, "wise men come to Jerusalem and ask: where is the child who has been born King of the Jews?"

Herod is "the king of the Jews!" What are these foreigners talking about?! Herod knows very well what they are talking about.

Herod rules at the pleasure of Rome. Jesus rules at the command of God. Herod knows exactly what this means. It's why he slaughters the children under 2 years of age—hoping in vain to slaughter this challenge to his throne.

The scandal doesn't end there. Those who act like God lives far away; whose God listens to prayers as if on the other end of a long distance telephone call; they too are scandalized by this odd God; the ground of all being; the creator of all things; the ineffable mystery; who comes to us as a wailing, naked, infant boy.

God never was: "out there," out in space, out of touch, out of reach. God always is: "Emmanuel," "With us-God". "Emmanuel."

Because of that, we are not a people waiting for the end. We are watchers, who see God right here, right now, in our very midst. "Where two or more are gathered, I am there," Jesus promises.

A Methodist Bishop told this story to our Wednesday Bible Study class. She recalled as a youngster in very rural Texas, following her mother home one night, carrying water from the well that was far from home. It happened during that long walk home, late at night. The luminous glow from the Milky Way is the only light.

Her mom walks up ahead of her and the girl is alone. She begins to feel frightened. She begins to feel utterly alone. Then she begins to get angry. Angry at her mom for leaving her. Angry at God for allowing it. She starts to ask where is God? She starts to ask if there even is a God. Or is she, in the end, truly alone in the world?

She then shares how, in the midst of all of this, as she walks, lost, lonely and scared, the sky above her reaches down and with something like arms, embraces her, and with something like a voice, whispers "you are not alone." Emmanuel. With us, God.

Bill O'Reilly of Fox News fame wrote a remarkable column this week. He said, and I quote: "[Some say] the baby Jesus wants us to provide [help to others] no matter what the circumstances. But, being a Christian, I know that while Jesus promoted charity at the highest level, he was not self-destructive." Which is another way of saying, "Jesus helps folks, just not more than what we would define as reasonable."

This is the mistake that many make. It's a mistake that says: "Only the deserving are deserving --- the rest are on their own." And with this mistake, we try to make the gospel fit our lives (thereby making the gospel small) rather than fitting our lives into the gospel (and making our lives large).

Loving the undeserving, helping the ungrateful, being there for those whose own stupidity got them where they are, this is the greatest scandal of Jesus.

But when we come to see that each of us, each in our own way, is in that very company at one time or another in our lives, then what seems to be scandal, to be unfair, unjust, now is an oasis, a lighthouse, a way home.

You see, while we busy ourselves with morality and laws and rules of conduct, God busies himself with getting every last one of us right with God. By becoming one of us. Immanuel.

“By the mystery of the *incarnation*, God cancels all tests and gives everyone an A+. In the mystery of Christ’s *death*, he drops all of the rotten works of the world down the black hole of his own forgetting; and in the mystery of Christ’s *resurrection*, he makes a new world in which we’re all home free.” Capon, *The Mystery of Christ*, 104.

Can you swallow that? And if you can, can you pass it on? Can you live it, this scandal, whom we call God?

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