

“With Us!”:  
A Sermon for Trinity United Church (Nanaimo, B.C.)  
for December 18<sup>th</sup> 2016 (Fourth Sunday of Advent)  
by Foster Freed

Matthew 1: 18-25

It is entirely fitting...or so I have come to believe...entirely fitting that the opening chapter of the New Testament (which is to say the opening chapter of the Gospel according to Matthew) is steeped in scandal. Steeped in scandal from start to finish! For while it is certainly the case that Matthew doesn't dive into his opening story until the chapter is 2/3rds of the way to its completion (that's the portion we heard just now), what precedes that opening narrative is a genealogy: a genealogy that does a lovely job of anticipating the story that follows: the scandal drenched story that follows! How else...

...how else to explain the fact that Matthew—in tracing the lineage of Jesus in his opening genealogy—includes the names of four women along with the lengthy list of over forty men who are said to be Jesus' direct ancestors. Who are these women? Suffice it to say, the first three women on Matthew's list each conceive a child under questionable circumstances: the first by pretending to be a prostitute (her name is Tamar), the second who is actually a prostitute and a foreigner to boot (her name is Rahab) and the third (namely Bathsheba whose name is never mentioned in Matthew's genealogy but is simply referred to as the wife of Uriah the Hittite)...her distinction is conceiving a child with David, despite the fact that her husband is very much alive at the time the child is conceived. Three women whose names are connected with scandal...making, I'm sure you will agree, rather notorious company for the fourth woman on that list: a woman named Miriam...better known in these parts as Mary.

And yes: having placed Mary in that rather distinctive company, the story Matthew proceeds to tell does not disappoint. Whatever ambiguity may exist concerning the birth of Jesus in Luke's Gospel, there is no such ambiguity here, in Matthew's account. Mary is pregnant prior to her having slept with Joseph; that's spelled out in no uncertain terms! And Joseph is sufficiently troubled by the matter that he considers leaving Mary: until an angel intercedes and gives Joseph the kind of insider-information that would get him arrested on Wall Street. In short, Joseph is told that his concerns are unfounded; Mary has been faithful; the child she has conceived is no ordinary child, and he should gladly assume the role of the child's father. Joseph is placated by that message, but surely, we the reader are not so naïve as to presume that all went swimmingly from that point onward. Nazareth was a small-town. News...and gossip travelled swiftly. We needn't possess a particularly sharp IQ to recognize that something of this scandal would have impacted all three members of the Holy Family as Joseph and Mary raised the boy in this remote backwater. “Who is this child? More to the point: whose is this child? Is it really you, Joseph? Or are you just some

sentimental fool, covering for Mary because you felt sorry for her?” Heads must have been shaken. And tongues must have enjoyed a good wag. After all, who doesn’t enjoy a wee bit of scandal?

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One of the ironies, of course...one of the ironies of how this story of Jesus’ conception and birth has fared in the modern era—which is to say the era during which science has been in the ascendance—one of the ironies is that this story (this ancient story of a suspect birth) continues to cause scandal, though not nearly the same scandal to which its first readers would most likely have been sensitive. In the case of modernity, it is the claim of a virgin birth that tends to scandalize us: often to the point of distraction. I have long made my peace with the fact that most United Church folk prefer saying our UCC Creed: the one we shall, indeed, recite later this morning. Nor do I any longer find it surprising when I ask those who dislike the far more ancient Apostle’s Creed as to the source of their discomfort. More often than not, they will cite the phrase from the Creed’s second paragraph, the phrase that names Jesus as having been “born of the Virgin Mary.” While I will occasionally attempt to assure folks that they can—if they so choose—simply think of the phrase “Virgin Mary” as a way of distinguishing this Mary from the other Mary’s we encounter in the New Testament, for the most part that explanation fails to satisfy the concerns of those who simply cannot accept the whole notion of a virgin birth.

For what it’s worth: when push comes to shove I’m sympathetic to those struggles although, frankly, I don’t share them. Mind you: when it comes to the **central** mystery of the Christian faith—namely the resurrection of Jesus from the dead—that, to me, is a big big miracle, one that does require an impressively large conception of God in order for it to hold any credibility. By contrast, manipulating a couple of strands of genetic material...which from a scientific perspective is what a virgin birth would entail...seems like pretty minor stuff, frankly. Surely a god who could not pull off that piece of business would scarcely deserve the name “god”! But let’s not quibble over that this morning! The bottom line is that the story of Jesus’ scandalous birth is a gift that keeps on giving: whether one is scandalized in the way Matthew’s first century contemporaries would have been scandalized by this story’s hints of a **tainted** pregnancy, or whether one prefers to be scandalized in the more modern sense, by this story’s insistence that what we have here is actually a **miraculous** pregnancy. Either way...either way...it’s scandal from top to bottom and back again!

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Well! Those of you who have come to know me, will likely sense that there is a “twist” coming: a pretty big twist having to do with an aspect of this story which—if we really ponder it—represents what should be, for us, the real source of scandal in the story Matthew shares of Jesus birth. I am

referring...referring to the core message the angel brings to Joseph, as Joseph struggles with his response to Mary's difficult piece of news.

*"She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."* In and of itself, that's a pretty big promise, an inconceivably wonderful promise! But there's more. *"All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet..."*, an explanation immediately followed by a quote from Isaiah. *"Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel."* Just in case Matthew's Greek speaking readers would miss the significance of that name—which actually is more like a title since the child's name was Jesus—Matthew spells it out. *"...they shall call his name Immanuel...which means, God with us."* Right there: that's the real scandal on display this morning. Immanuel! God! God with us! God...with the likes of you and me! Accept no substitute. God, Lord of heaven and earth, **with us!**

And you know: when push comes to shove, I think a really good place from which to gain our bearings—perhaps more accurately, a really good place from which to realize that we don't actually have any bearings for what we are being told here!....a really good place from which to begin is the opening chapter or two of the book Job. If that seems like an odd choice to you, hang on to your hat and permit me to explain where I'm coming from. Because where I am coming from involves that most slippery of characters: the one who challenges God in the opening chapters of Job, namely the Satan...Satan...the adversary...who in the context of Job is not the malignant figure we get to know in the pages of the New Testament, but more like a prosecuting attorney! A member of God's court...charged with the solemn responsibility of playing...well, playing devil's advocate! In effect...in effect the entire book Job turns upon a challenge Satan places before God: a challenge through which Satan essentially invites God to give God's head a good shake and recognize what a horrendous mistake God has made in creating human beings. And really...

...really. Surely anyone following the nightly news over the past few weeks must feel some degree of sympathy with Satan's complaint. Some of you may have read the story of the juror who was serving on a trial that involved a particularly heinous crime. In the aftermath of sitting on that jury and watching video evidence of the crime, this juror, this poor soul committed suicide. And what, I ask, do any of us make of the news—the images, the video evidence—coming out of Aleppo, to cite one especially chilling but by no means isolated example of what we so casually refer to as "man's inhumanity to man". How much of that can any of us endure, even when we are viewing it from the safe distance of our television screens, before we find ourselves sympathizing with anyone—the devil included—who might find themselves asking out loud: "Why God? Why did you need to spoil a perfectly lovely created realm, by bringing this malignant bunch onto the stage of life? Did you really have so much time on your hands that you could think of nothing better to do than to create so

grotesque a race? Is that what it's come to, Creator God?" Those questions...those questions are all implicit in the challenge Satan places before God in the opening chapters of one of the Bible's most profound meditations on the reality of evil: a meditation which offers very little by way of definitive answer to that most pressing of questions: why? Why humanity? But now here's the thing.

When we close to the final chapter of the Old Testament, and turn the page to the first chapter of the New Testament, and read that first chapter—with its proclamation of the good but terribly odd news of Emmanuel, God with us!....

...when we do that...and do that from the angle of vision provided by the opening pages of Job, is it not hard to escape the impression that God, far from heeding Satan's challenge...far from providing a cogent answer to the question—why humanity?—is choosing instead simply to double down on the bet. In effect, God is saying to anyone willing to listen and demonstrating to anyone with eyes to see, that having created the human race, God has no intention of abandoning that race. On the contrary: God's answer to Satan could not be clearer, namely that God's affection, love, loyalty to humanity was so extensive, so thorough-going, so radical, that God was prepared to move from the outside looking in, to take up a location on the inside looking out. No longer content to view humanity from a distance...what the New Testament entails is God's willingness to become human...to take on our flesh...our blood....our triumphs...our foibles...our failures....our sins. To get hands dirty! To become implicated in all things human...as a first step toward redeeming all things human! And how odd...how odd indeed all of that must surely have looked to the Adversary...since, frankly...given what a mess we have made of so much that has been entrusted to us...

...given all that was and that shall be by way of blood, sweat and tears, by way of bitterness and betrayal....given all of that....even we ourselves surely cannot help but marvel...marvel at the real scandal that marks this and every Christmas. Emmanuel! God with us! Better still! God for us: for us in ways we cannot even begin to imagine, let alone comprehend.

Sacred infant, all divine,  
what a mighty love was thine;  
thus to come from highest bliss,  
down to such a world as this...

...such a world as this...

...such a world as this.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ! Praise to You, Lord Jesus Christ!