

**Christmas Parade of Homes: Family Reunion with Matthew
Jeremiah 33:14-16 and Matthew 1:1-6, 17-25
Fourth Sunday of Advent: December 20, 2015
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In an editorial for *The Christian Century* a couple of years ago, Pastor and author John Buchanan recalled an experience from the early years of his ministry. He was trying to make sure his young children understood that Christmas is mostly about Jesus and not what the shopping mall would make it out to be. As he put it, he was “attempting to counter all the commercial hullabaloo about Santa.” So he bought a cardboard cutout crèche, sat down at the kitchen table with one of his children, and together they undertook the project of putting it all together: stable, manger, baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, sheep, cows, shepherds and wise men with instructions that said, “fold on dotted line, place tab A into slot B,” and so on.

“It was a disaster,” Buchanan wrote years later. “Nothing worked the way it was supposed to. The kitchen table was littered with torn, bent, useless figures. Apart from Scotch tape this was not going to work. Surveying the disastrous scene on the table, the four-year-old to whom I was trying to explain the real meaning of Christmas, said, “So, Daddy, where *is* God in this mess?”¹

Out of the mouths of babes... Yes, that’s precisely the question, isn’t it? Where, exactly, is God in this mess? As we’ve seen thus far in our Christmas Parade of Homes, Mark’s gospel points us to the power of Christ’s resurrection and claims that that changes everything. John’s gospel focuses us on the hope of God’s light shining in the midst of the world’s darkness. So, what about Syria, what about the Middle East, what about bombs going off in Paris? *Where is God in this mess?*

This year, there is poignancy certainly, to hear again the ancient prophet’s word, “the people who walk in darkness have seen a great light; those who live in a land of deep darkness, on them light has shined.” If you cast your eyes with sympathy upon the unrelenting military operations, airplane crashes killing innocent people, or the racial tensions in our country and around the world, it is hard to see a break in the darkness among all those hearts that are breaking.

¹ John Buchanan, “Where Is God in this Mess?”, Fourth Pres., 12/21/08, p. 1.

And it's not just the front page news that gives rise to our questions about how God is involved in the world. It's also our culture in which assault rifles are easier to purchase than medicine for mental illness, in which violence has become embedded in so many forms of entertainment, in which people work as many hours as they can at any kind of work they can find and still teeter on the razor thin edge of poverty. Where, exactly, *is* God in all of this?

According to the gospel writer Matthew, this is precisely where God chooses to enter in – in the darkest of days, into the human family, among oppressed people under military occupation, and where we are afraid and life is a mess. This is what sets the stage for Jesus' birth in Matthew's genealogy – a complex web of tangled relationships, where people uncertain about the future, try to take things into their own hands. This family tree of Jesus includes people who do not follow social customs when it comes to inheritance; it includes sibling rivalry of the very worst kind; it includes sinful people trying to chart their own course by their own awful means.

Now, I spared you the reading of 28 generations of Jesus' ancestors, from King David on, but, truth be told, the interesting ones really do come at the beginning. When you stop by Matthew's house for Christmas you hope the music is loud and the drink is strong, because it is one heck of a family reunion, and you better be careful who you end up talking to!

Jesus' great grandfathers and great-grandmothers lived lives that were replete with scandal. The story of Jesus Christ begins with Abraham the father of Isaac; no mention of his first born Ishmael who was unfairly banished. Then Isaac begets Jacob; not a word about his elder brother Esau whose birthright Jacob stole. Jacob is the father of Judah; with no mention of the good and extraordinary Joseph whom Judah threw into a pit as a boy and left for dead. Where *is* God in this mess?

Matthew is being absolutely faithful to Old Testament theology when he makes clear that God does not necessarily select the noblest or most deserving people to carry on divine purposes. I think it is fascinating, for example, that the family tree remembers that David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah. The genealogy recalls that the great King David sent Uriah to the front line of battle to be killed so that David could have Uriah's wife, Bathsheba, whom he'd been lusting after while peeking over into her roof-top bath tub.

Now, if you think the men are less than outstanding forebears of our Lord, the women they tangle with tell R-rated tales that don't really fit our notions of sugar plums dancing in our dreams. I'm talking prostitution, deceit, seduction, adultery, violence and murder. All of these people in Jesus' family tree have scandal attached to them, all the way down to his mother, Mary, with her unconventional pregnancy, and Joseph – who was so overwhelmed by his predicament that he had to be convinced in a dream, when he was semi-conscious, what to do about it. I don't know about you, but it makes me feel a little bit better about my family tree.

Matthew's genealogy shows us where God is in this mess of the human family – right in the middle of it. The birth narrative of Jesus draws back the curtain on God's involvement in human history, beginning with the call of Abraham and Sarah. God's involvement is ever unconventional, always making a way out of no way, persistent in taking fragile, sinful human people – people like us – and working through them for larger, holy, even righteous purposes.

At Matthew's Christmas party you don't sip fine wine out of crystal and eat canapés off of silver trays; it's more like a barn dance out back, where you tell raucous yarns about the past, and how, by God, anyone could have survived it to see the light of a new day. Matthew's celebration of the birth of Jesus is wild and weird, and filled with all kinds of outrageous people, as well as the memories of how violent and fearful our world can be. Yet it is here, following a long line of questionable forebears, that an angel of the Lord appears to Joseph in a dream and says: "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

All of this that is about to take place fulfills those Old Testament prophecies that "a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means, God with us." God is with us in this mess.

As theologian, Bill Placher, has written: "Jesus is going to "change the rules... He's a king born in a stable. He is God made flesh, but his birth occasioned scandal and violence... it is an embarrassed woman, some strange foreigners, and some disreputable shepherds who seem to be those with whom and through whom God is working in the birth of this human being who is also God."²

² Placher quote from Buchanan, p. 3.

So where can we look to find God today? We might begin by watching and expecting God to show up in the middle of whatever shambles the world is in, or in the painful dysfunction of our own families, or in whatever mess we find in our own lives.

Gail Godwin's novel, *Evensong*, is about the pastor of a small Episcopal parish in the Smokey Mountains, suffering from economic and social unrest. Pastor Margaret Bonner's otherwise well-ordered life becomes a tangled web of volatile community concerns, marriage problems, and her own soul-searching. One bleak December, she invites a teen-aged girl named Jennifer to be the lay reader in worship. She's about the age of Mary, the mother of Jesus, Margaret supposes, and she reads the whole genealogy at the beginning of Matthew's gospel. Margaret then preaches a sermon, along the lines of mine this morning, about how God enters into this crazy world of ours through people a lot like us.

She says: "Matthew's genealogy shows us how the story of Jesus Christ contained, and would continue to contain, the flawed and inflicted and insulted, the cunning and the weak-willed and the misunderstood. His is an equal opportunity ministry for crooks and saints." And then she comments about the end of the long series of names that I did not read this morning. "And what about that final fourteen generations of unknown, or unremarkable names...? Who was Azor, or Achim? Who was Eliud, who was Eliazar? Or even this Mathan, who according to Matthew, was Jesus' great-grandfather? What did they do? What kind of people were they? We do not know. You won't find their names in the concordance, or in any biblical *Who's Who*. ... This is, of course, where the message settles directly upon us. If so much powerful stuff can have been accomplished down through the millennia, through people who were such complex mixtures of sinner and saint, and through so many obscure and undistinguished others, isn't that a pretty hopeful testament to the likelihood that God is using us, with our individual flaws and gifts, in all manner of peculiar and unexpected ways? Who of us can say we are not in the process of being used right now... to fulfill some purpose whose grace and goodness would boggle our imagination if we could even begin to get our minds around it." ³

Here at Matthew's house on this last Sunday before Christmas, we discover again that the birth of Jesus is so much bigger than one small family drama that fits nicely on the mantel in a manger scene. It is earth-rending, heaven-shaking good

³ Gail Godwin, "Genealogy and Grace," from *Evensong* p. 166-7, excerpted in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*, p. 164.

news in human history for the whole human family. God is in the business of transforming messiness into holiness; God enters into the most painful of human realities, and God equips us to be Christ-like instruments of grace and goodness. Because Christ himself is Emmanuel – God with us. With us in this messy world of ours. This is good news, very good news indeed. Amen.