

"A Peculiar Story" based on Matthew 1:18-25
Aspen Community United Methodist Church
meeting at the Aspen Historical Society
December 19, 2010

Page 1 of 7

(The story of the birth of Jesus is a very human story. How Mary and Joseph respond to the divine is a message about how we might more fully live our lives.)

It's a peculiar story – isn't it?
It's a peculiar time – Christmas.

Some Christmas's stay forever in our hearts and minds
because they seemed to live up to that kind of myth of Christmas -
that myth of everything being picture perfect.

Other Christmas's are forever etched in our memories
because they were so imperfect: Christmas disasters

Sometimes our most authentic Christmas experiences
are when everything seems to go wrong.

It's those times that we actually discover the Christ child
the tenderness of God
right here in the midst of something.

And you almost have tears in your eyes.

The Christmas story is out to change us -
infuse a new energy into our lives
to serve not only ourselves but the world.

The story has its cast of characters
and the stories of this first Christmas from the gospels
would never make it into anyone's picture album
of perfect holiday moments.

Luke gives us a lot of details about everything
that went wrong when Jesus was born.

Matthew's gospel has a list of ancestors dating back to Abraham -
for the one he calls the Messiah.

The family tree is impressive and unsavory -
honorable and scandalous -
people who were on the inside - and people who were on the out.
That is an awful lot like the world we know -
and probably our own families.

Not that that matters.

What matters is Joseph's dream and his willingness to take it seriously.

The Holy Spirit was diving
into the rough and tumble of human life.

Matthew wrote about a King
would bring revolutionary change from the world they all knew.
They wanted someone to make things perfect.
It was not going to be - in the way most people thought.

Matthew wrote about an imperfect Messiah from the very start.
It was not a story of perfection in politics or religion
but a story of incarnation in human living.

As imperfect as we are in just about everything -
there is this divine connection that wants us – lures us
to work for good every chance we get.

Thing is – we are also the arms and legs of God -
and we need to be reminded of that over and over.

We are to live out that love
brought to us in the Christ child.

Christmas is a little piece of God right here in front of us.

It brings surprisingly good things in the midst of odd things.

The story shows the Spirit participating in conceiving a baby -
explaining things to Joseph in a dream -
assuring a frightened Mary -
and that's just the beginning.

It descends upon a grown Jesus at his baptism –
moves among his disciples at Pentecost -
blows a spiritual community into the world -
like no other community of faith ever has. ¹

Hear the words – the verbs:

Participates
Explains
Assures
Descends
Moves
Blows

Our role is to join the action.
Help love run the world – not hate, not fear, not greed

God is with us is what Matthew says.
And that makes a difference in what happens in our lives.

It means God is always calling us beyond our fears –
beyond our notions of what should be but is not –
beyond that thing that happened that hurt so much –
beyond the lack of love that sometimes describes our stance –

beyond our disbelief –

beyond our hope that some kind of other-worldly
savior will alleviate the conditions of the world
because that will be really hard to do -

things that Matthew knew were important
at that time - and are important still.



What's the point?

The point is that this Christ child
will live his life full of the Spirit in every way.

His life will go beyond the baseness of much of human history -
the history of war – of domination –
of violence – of hunger.

He won't cling to the status quo
when he knows it will hurt people.

He will teach forgiveness – because he will live it.



Here's a story that tells it another way:

Once there lived a village of creatures
along the bottom of a great crystal river.

The current of the river swept over them all.

Each creature clung tightly
to the twigs and rocks at the river bottom.

For clinging was their way of life.

From very early in life -
they all learned that the frightful current was to be resisted.

But one creature said at last -
"I am tired of clinging.

Though I cannot see it with my eyes -
I trust that the current knows where it is going.

I shall let go -
and let it take me where it will.
Clinging – I shall die of boredom."

The other creatures laughed and said:

"You fool!

Let go – and that current you worship will throw you
tumbled and smashed across the rocks -
and you shall die quicker than boredom!"

But he refused to listen to them - took a deep breath and let go.

He was immediately
tumbled and smashed by the current across the rocks.

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Page 5 of 7

Yet in time as the creature refused to cling again
the current lifted him free from the bottom
and he moved with the current.

Downstream the creatures who didn't know him were amazed.
They cried – "This is the messiah – come to save us all."

And the one carried in the current said -
"I am no more Messiah than you.

The river wants you to be free –
and all you need to do is let go.
Our true work is this voyage – this adventure."

But they cried "Savior" even more -
all the while clinging to the rocks.
And - when they looked again he was gone -
and they were left alone making legends of a Savior.²



What's this about?

The Christmas story from the gospels is really a story of liberation -
partly from our own self-imposed limitations.

The Christmas story is something that exists
to remind us that the Divine is active - often more active than we.

Our true work is this voyage – the adventure.

If Mary and Joseph had settled for the status quo:
(Remember there was the temptation.)
"He had in mind to divorce her quietly."

That would be something like
clinging to the rocks and twigs in the crystal river.
End of story.

This is all to say
that the actions of Mary and Joseph
and others who we did not even mention today

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Page 6 of 7

beckon us into brave and courageous lives -
and the risks that may come with them.

So - what might we do?

Just a few suggestions:

Be a little more open to the angels in your lives
trying to tell you something.

For those ways you fall short and you know it -
those things you have done and not done -
there is something called forgiveness
if you will just work with it.

And - be assured that there is a divine spark in you
that will comfort and uphold you.
The current know where it goes.



Problem is – it's in our human nature to forget these things.

We get too busy negotiating our life -
tending to the rocks and twigs of our lives.

We think we need to solve everything ourselves.

By about November when we are deep into that mindset -
Advent comes around again
with the story of this peculiar little family
taking all these risks.

And like Mary – we ponder it in our hearts.
You ponder it in your heart.

You get to thinking about how you might live your life better.

You don't want to hang on too tight
to the rocks and twigs - and miss the flow.
And you don't want to get smashed on the rocks either.



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Page 7 of 7

I began by talking about Christmas's we remember.

This will be a Christmas to remember for Aspen Community Church.

It's risky to close your church for an indefinite time
and try to hold on to a congregation
who is so accustomed to its space.

It's more risky to allow a whole lot of people
to go in and out of a building when it is potentially dangerous.

But the big story that we tell at Christmas
is that "no room at the inn" is really all about possibility.

May the Holy Spirit that participates – explains - assures –
descends – moves – and blows -
do it in your life and do it in this church
in this great season.

Amen.

¹ Adapted from Rex Hunt

² Adapted from Ian Lawton