

Sermon for the Fourth Sunday of Advent

RCL Lectionary, Year C

[Micah 5:2-5a](#) / [Canticle 3 or 15 \(Luke 1:46-55\)](#) / [Hebrews 10:5-10](#) / [Luke 1:39-45](#)

December 20th, 2009

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour

Mill Valley, California

The Scandal of Advent

by The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

So, this is it. The last weekend before Christmas, and Mill Valley, like just about every other town, was buzzing yesterday with activity. Daniel and I joined the throngs doing some last-minute shopping: lights for the tree, errands that had long been postponed before the week opens and we plunge headlong towards Christmas Eve. Here at Church of Our Saviour, we have our annual Pageant dress rehearsal after today's service, a beautiful coffee hour, and then our Greenswinding with stone soup. It's a time of memory, joy for some of us, the sadness that comes for some of us with the emotional recollections that this season brings, a bittersweet occasion of expectation, hope, and imagination for so many, nurtured by carols, familiar stories, and time-honored traditions.

I've noticed that a new computer-generated version of Dickens' A Christmas Carol is back in theaters. We are haunted anew by the ghost of Christmas past, those growling grumbles that echo across the years as we are invited to listen to Scrooge's now almost immortal "Humbug," yet again: that "humbug" as Scrooge was scandalized by Christmas and everything that came with it.

It's tempting to be Scrooge-like this time of year. That easy conversion of our "could's" and "would's" to the "should's" can drive us to distraction. We are often caught like Scrooge in the scandal of the joy and mirth we think we see in others when we don't necessarily feel the same way. . .or at least feel the ways we think we should. Maybe we are tempted to be Scrooge-like by the constant demands on our time and pocketbooks that come with Christmas, shopping, and the pressing bottom lines of every 501(c)3 we can imagine out in force at this time.

I wonder if it isn't that we, and Scrooge, too, struggle in part with the scandal that has always lurked beneath the Christmas Tree. That we struggle to keep secret something unsettling in the heart of Christmas. This is the beginning of our journey, you see, just as this sense of being scandalized was the beginning of Scrooge's journey.

One curious scandal, perhaps, is that Christmas for us is really an amalgamation of Northern European pagan traditions with ancient Roman solstice festivals --Christianized, perhaps, but then also wildly and sometimes obscenely commercialized of late so our struggling economy can come out a bit ahead by year's end.

But there's even a deeper scandal than that -- one that we recount each year in our scripture readings -- especially the Lukan account that we have this year. For instance, if you crack open your Bible, you'd notice that Jesus' pedigree in Chapter 3 is not just made up of the great Davidic lineage of Israel, but of ne'er do wells and scandalous figures of Hebrew tradition. Folk that, even in our let-it-all-hang-out era, would make most of us blush to claim as our spiritual ancestors. And then, of course, there's the story of Jesus' conception itself -- of an angel coming to a peasant Galilean Jewish girl in Nazareth and telling her she is about to bear the Messiah -- without any help, thank you very much, from the man to whom she is betrothed.

That Mary accepts this is in itself remarkable. Either she is profoundly naïve and foolish or remarkably faithful to an unpredictable God. Christian tradition generally prefers the latter view. Betrothal traditionally meant a time for the couple to set up a household together and ensure the woman's purity -- which in a patriarchal society meant the purity of her husband-to-be's bloodline. That Mary is about to conceive prior to entering the marriage bed with Joseph throws

a huge monkey-wrench into the tradition and risks the logical consequence of his tossing her out for impurity and infidelity. Even if Joseph agrees to go through with the marriage, Mary's betrothal pregnancy will still get tongues a-wagging, and probably have the scandal-mongers out in force.

But that's really only the beginning. Because, you see, the whole notion that God is going to be born in the mess of a stable in a dusty little town – that the God of all Creation, the Maker of the Cosmos, is about to appear through all the pain and blood of childbirth, is a scandal of theological – if not cosmological – proportions. It flies in the face of all the perfection and intellectual notions about *who God is* – too holy to be among us little, imperfect folk; too transcendent to touch our mortal and messy lives; too great to fit into the little households, gossipy neighborhoods, and mundane, imperfect familial relationships that most of humanity has inhabited across the ages.

Yet this God “does not shun the virgin's womb,” and Mary sings her song to magnify this rather scandalous God, leaving the philosophers and great theologians scratching their heads and the wealthy and powerful kings running for cover or sharpening their swords. Mary agrees to welcome into the very depths of her soul a baby Savior who – even before he can utter a word – turns the whole of the world as we know it inside out. The rich are sent away empty. The poor and humble are exalted. The hungry are filled and the powerful are cast down.

I find myself wondering this year if Mary is truly the first Christian, the first to answer the call of Advent – the first of the new blood-line welcoming God into the heart – even to be embodied in our midst in this scandalous way, which we carry on in the scandal of the common cup and the bread broken and shared. Which we carry on when we reach out to the most scandalous of our age – be they the impoverished, the homeless, or the marginalized. . . Be they the subject of cynicism, ill-repute, and gossip. When we reach out to our enemies and embrace them as friends, or set aside with our Savior the familiar patterns of violence and retribution for self-offering and endless forgiveness.

This is the faith that we nurture as we pray our stumbling prayers with imperfect words. A faith that we nurture alongside Mary in the middle of our imperfect and messy, sometimes scandalous lives – and find ourselves lifted up and sanctified in the process – much to the consternation of a cynical and sometimes bewildered world – a world that finds the language of commercialism, violence, and warfare easier than coping with the scandal of Christmas: a scandal of divine promises made to a lowly peasant and her family in a remote little village in a tiny, conquered country all those centuries ago. And then there's the scandal of scandals that philosophers and intellectuals still scratch their heads over: that this lowly peasant became the mother of a new blood-line that would conquer kingdom, empire, time, and even death itself.

My sisters and brothers, this time of year, we are called to follow in Mary's footsteps: to magnify the Lord, to proclaim the greatness of our God, to allow our Savior to be born in the very depths of our soul – with all the potential for scandal and the remaking of the world around us and within us that entails. This is the call of Advent, the call upon us in our shared Christian vocation, and what it means to become a people not just for, but a people *of* Christmas.