
Jesus' "Scandalous Gospel"

A Sermon by the Rev. Theophus "Thee" Smith
Advent 4A

In the name of God: Our Creator, Redeemer, Defender, and Friend. Amen.

Barely, maybe just barely, today's gospel avoids a scandal in telling us the facts of Jesus' birth. But the rumor of scandal keeps rising to the surface. It's just that the rumors are overtaken by something more important than scandal or hint of scandal. This birth is the advent of God coming into the world as one of us!

That's the news that trumps the scandalous details of Jesus' birth. It's the "good news" of the gospel. Remember that the word "gospel" comes to us from an Old English word that means good news—"gōd-spel" (with a long "o" sound as in the word, "go"). To go to the good news about Jesus' birth is certainly a higher priority in scripture than any scandal or apparent scandal.

However, it's the business of preachers to take us behind-the-scenes and reveal the "back story" whenever useful. It's also the preacher's business to get our attention at the beginning of a sermon even if we fail to keep everyone's attention later in the sermon!

For my part I always try to do this with some joke or bit of humor. That's because I'm committed to humor as a sign that there is, in fact, some good news going on "hereabouts" somewhere. Even if my best effort is lame or plain silly, or most of us don't get it, or it falls flat and no one laughs—at least I try. One can at least try to simulate the joy that comes from hearing something good; something that can perhaps rescue us from the day's negative feelings or a bad attitude.

If hilarity is a key sign of gospel good news, we can at least smile even if we're only smiling at the preacher's poor effort to be funny. So I invite you to smile at the following effort to introduce today's gospel reading with a bit of humor.

The celebrity preacher at Harvard University, black Baptist minister Peter Gomes, tells the following story in his 2007 book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*.

Some years ago I was on a night flight from Boston to London on a Saturday and was to preach in a London church on Sunday morning . . . Then, midway over the Atlantic Ocean we encountered significant turbulence and were warned to keep our seatbelts fastened.

Less concerned about the storm than about my sermon, I took out my notes and my Bible, and as I read, the lady beside me, who had been mercifully quiet throughout the flight, observed me. As the turbulence increased she noticed that I was reading the Bible, and finally she asked, nervously, "Do you know something that I should know?"

Well, maybe we think that's funny and maybe we don't. But if you or I had been there we might have been a bit more expressive, saying something like

"Do you know something that the rest of us should know?"

[More intensely, perhaps with a hint of panic:]

"Or do you always read your Bible whether or not the plane is about to crash?" Linda Kuhlman, "Peter Gomes Preaches "The Scandalous Gospel," accessed 12/18/2010 by this author at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17167168

Okay, so much for an attempt at good humor! In this case, moreover, there's an interesting connection to today's gospel. "Yes, Virginia,' there is "something that you should know.' In this case of today's gospel appointed for the Fourth Sunday of Advent there is a background story that can reveal even more good news in that gospel story.

There's no need for you to know this, but today's gospel from the first chapter of Matthew is preceded the very first verses of the New Testament; verses that begin famously with the genealogy of Jesus. As Matthew puts it:

An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah and his brothers, and Judah the father of Perez and Zerah by Tamar . . . (Matthew 1.1-3)

Now with this reference to the name of Tamar we have the first of five women among the forty-three men who are named in Matthew's genealogy. Mary the mother of Jesus is the last woman named, as we read at the end of the genealogy after the naming of Joseph, her husband:

. . . Joseph the husband of Mary, [the Mary] of whom Jesus was born . . . (Matthew 1.16).

Now between Tamar at the beginning of the genealogy, and Mary at the end, there are three other women named in Jesus' line of ancestors: Ruth, Rahab, and Bathsheba. And what do all these women have in common? As one commentator puts it, there is "Some seemingly sexual impropriety in connection with them" (Paul Nuechterlein, "Girardian Reflections on the Lectionary," accessed at http://girardianlectionary.net/year_a/advent4a.htm by this author on 12/19/2010).

It's "politically incorrect' now, of course, but in the sacred texts of many religions women are mentioned often when there's something sexual to notice. In this case both Tamar and Ruth can be described as having seduced their husbands before marrying them" Judah and Boaz respectively. And of course Rahab the Harlot, and Bathsheba the seduced wife of King David, were explicitly involved in sexual misconduct. [Note: some commentators question whether the "Rahab' in Matthew's genealogy and Rahab the Harlot were the same woman; see the "Encyclopedia of Creation Science" accessed 12/19/2010 by this author at [http://creationwiki.org/Salmon_\(Bible\)](http://creationwiki.org/Salmon_(Bible))]

Now what does all this back story have to do with the birth of Jesus? Of course: also in today's gospel there are references to issues of sexual misconduct, beginning in the very first verse:

When [Jesus'] mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child . . . (vs. 18)

Then there follows immediately this verse:

Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly . . . (vs. 19)

And finally the reading ends with the climactic verses:

. . . [Joseph] did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus (vss. 24-25).

In what way, therefore, does today's gospel avoid being "bad news" about the scandalous possibility of Jesus' illegitimate birth? To state the question plainly, was he or was he not born out of wedlock? 1

Of course, the scripture is quite clear in declaring that:

before [Joseph and Mary] lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit (vs. 18);

and that

just when [Joseph] had resolved to [dismiss her quietly], an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit . . ." (vs. 20);

and climatically, that

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us" (Matthew 1.22-23)

Now this last verse, we note, is a fulfillment of the very prophecy we heard read in our Old Testament scripture appointed for today, from the book of the prophet Isaiah (Isa. 7.14).

But even here we have not yet arrived at the good news of the gospel. The good news is not just that Jesus was conceived by the Holy Spirit instead of incurring the scandal of pre-marital relations. Nor is it sufficiently good news to declare that Jesus' birth is a marvelous fulfillment of ancient Hebrew prophecy.

For some believers that would be sufficient good news. And it really is good news, and has been for centuries of traditional Christians, that the Creator God of the universe was incarnated for us in Jesus Christ; the "God-man" in theological language "fully human and fully divine. Thanks be to God!

But here's a more universal declaration of good news for all persons living and dead, throughout world history, and up to today, Advent 2010. The universal good news, regardless of one's faith or unfaith, is that in the midst of actual scandals and not just hints and rumors and suggestions of scandals, but in the context of real scandals in our lives today Jesus Christ is and remains one of us.

As Matthew's gospel says, quoting Isaiah, his name "Emmanuel" means "God is with us" (Mt. 1.23). Just as important for believers, however, is his name, "Jesus," which Matthew says means, "he will save his people from their sins" (Mt. 1.21).

Now, beyond the scandals and sins of Jesus' ancient Hebrew ancestors we have our own scandals and sins today. What readily comes to mind this month are the big news scandals of the WikiLeaks cables, in which major governments including our own have been exposed to international news media, and to each others' public glare, as criticizing, despising, and condemning one another.

And yes, there are alleged scandals like the news that the WikiLeaks founder himself, Julian Assange, has been accused in Swedish court of sex crimes "whether falsely or not we do not yet know.

But the more critical question for us might be whether there is a "God with us" in scandals like the global economic crimes of Wall Street and the stock market and the mortgage crisis and our debt economy "our 'debtor economy' that promotes predatory lending, and irresponsible spending, and the gross profiteering of the world's wealthiest people exploiting the poorest people of the world.

Or is there a "God with us" in our own personal and everyday scandals of sexual misconduct, in our own criminal actions or the in the scandalous fact that some of us have incarcerated or criminal relatives about whom we do not speak. And let's not leave out our own irresponsible spending and hoarding of wealth and exploitation of others. Lord, have mercy on us too!

Now right here is the good news, of course: God does have mercy on us! That is what the Advent of our Lord is really about, that God's own self is with us in the incarnation of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. For Jesus was himself born with an ancestry of sinful human beings and, moreover, born into circumstances of scandal "both the seeming scandal of his own birth, and the actual scandals of his own ancestors' lives and liabilities.

Indeed, according to our Harvard preacher, Peter Gomes, the scandalous gospel of Jesus can possibly become even more scandalous in the world when his followers actually do as Jesus taught us: when we actually feed the poor, relieve the sick, shelter the dying, intercede for prisoners, intervene for the oppressed, and challenge the "powers that be" on behalf of the poor and the outcast and the exploited.

That's the good news that Harvard preacher Peter Gomes says his book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, is really about. The book is subtitled, "What's So Good about the Good News?" To justify that title Gomes explains that,

"Any of you who are looking to buy this book in the hope of filling out the particular genealogy of Jesus or the continuing relationships with Mary Magdalene ... or John, for that matter, I'm sorry to disappoint you," Gomes says.

On the contrary, the "scandal," according to Gomes, is the lack of attention to the gospel, even among those who consider themselves to be faithful Christians. The author argues that people tend to focus too much on who Jesus was and what he would do when "the question should be, 'What would Jesus have me do?'" . . .

In *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Gomes [declares:]

"It may be scandalous . . . if we actually tried to apply it in our communities . . . to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, love our neighbors . . . those are dangerous things." (Linda Kuhlman, "Peter Gomes Preaches "The Scandalous Gospel," accessed 12/18/2010 by this author at www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17167168)

And thus, Christian friends, on this last Sunday of Advent we turn from the penitential themes of Advent2 to the full-blown celebration of Christmas in the feast of the Incarnation. And the good news that we celebrate is both universal for all

people and particular for Christian believers.

For all people the good news is that the Jesus of history is "with us; with us as someone born into the scandals and wrongdoing of his ancestors, and someone subjected to the scandalous issues of his own birth. Indeed, the likelihood that he was himself suspected of scandalous paternity is part of his solidarity with others who are maligned and marginalized in families and societies.¹

But for believers the good news is even more to be celebrated at Christmas, the feast of the Incarnation. For believers, whose highest joy is to become like Jesus ourselves, Christmas celebrates the good news that we ourselves are empowered to become incarnations of the God who in Christ is committed to "feed the hungry, clothe the naked, love our neighbors . . ."

And so every year on this day we devoutly pray that incarnational Collect appointed for the Fourth Sunday of Advent:

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen. (Book of Common Prayer, p. 212)

Endnotes

1. [From pp. 3 and 5 above] This possibility of Jesus' illegitimate birth or "suspect paternity" is discussed in illuminating detail by Bruce Chilton in his book, *Jesus: A Jewish Life*; Image Books, 2002. Consider this reviewer's comment (accessed at www.spiritualityandpractice.com/books/books.php?id=2425 by this author on 12/18/2010):

I was quite impressed with the author's view that Jesus' status as a "mamzer" — an Israelite of suspect paternity — colored his life and ministry: "Such men and women lived in a caste apart, unable to marry within established bloodlines of Israel, and so were often excluded from the mainstream of Jewish life. . . . From the beginning of his life, Jesus negotiated the treacherous terrain between belonging to the people of God and ostracism in his own community." No wonder he remains today a touchstone for outcasts, losers, and rebels.

2. [From p. 5 above] In the church year Advent is traditionally observed as "a little Lent." Its four weeks, like the forty days of Lent, begin with penance and warnings of divine judgment. While scriptures announcing Christ's Second Coming start Advent, his "coming" in the preaching of John the Baptist always marks the third week. Finally the lectionary of readings make a transition in the fourth week with the shift to the nativity of his first coming in the celebrated Christ child.

However, regarding Advent *angst* Peter Gomes writes eloquently:

Advent is a more painful season than Lent. In Lent we can apply piety to personal circumstance, we can recreate something of an affinity with the historical phenomenon of Christ's suffering and of our own development through suffering. Advent, on the other hand, speaks of a perennial hope, a great expectation that, despite the language of the hymns that tell us that the day is drawing near and that light prevails over darkness, actually seems just like the "same old, same old." How many "theologies of hope" can trump the stubborn facts of good news postponed?

If we read the Epistles, especially those of Saint Paul within the circle of the writer's expectations and those of his first audience, we can only be disappointed in our expectations. The very first book of the New Testament canon, not Matthew, which has canonical priority, but 1 Thessalonians, which is older, is concerned with the anxieties of the faithful about the realization of the good news. The writer, especially in 1 Thessalonians 4, reassures the faithful that they should not lose heart even though many have already died. In chapter 5, the writer offers his famous analogy of the Lord coming like "a thief in the night," or "a

woman in travail." The word is to wait, work, and watch, and not to lose heart or patience. Modern audiences find solid comfort in these counsels; the only alternative is to proclaim an imminent return of the Lord, an end of the edge. There is a large and vibrant culture of expectation that suggests that the time is near.

In the meantime we can understand a reluctance to focus too much on the content of Jesus' preaching, largely because it is easier to talk about him than it is to talk about what he talked about.

Changing the Focus

The radical nature of the Jesus story is not in the way of his death"" the via dolorosa""nor is it even in his glorious resurrection, to which we instinctively respond when strangers fill the churches on Easter. The radical dimension of the Jesus story has to do with the content of his preaching, the nature of the glad tidings that he announced to be at hand . . .

If the focus is nearly always on the man for others who in the short term loses but who one of these days will return in triumph to win, then it is no wonder that so much of the Christian faith is either obsessed by the past or seduced by the prospects of a glorious future. In the meantime, things continue in their bad old way, and we live as realists in a world in which reality is nearly always the worst-case scenario . . .

Perhaps now, and in the pages that follow, is the time and place to look at just what Jesus preached and taught. How did it go down with his listeners? Is it any easier for us to hear than it was for them? If by this exercise we learn nothing else, we will discover that Jesus was always more concerned about tomorrow than about yesterday, but tomorrow's implications are lived out today, here and now. If we are sincere in wanting to know what Jesus would do, we must risk the courage to ask what he says, what he asks, and what he demands. Only if we do so will we be able to move, however cautiously and imperfectly, from the Bible to the gospel.

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Linda Kuhlman, "Peter Gomes Preaches ""The Scandalous Gospel,"" accessed on 12/18/2010 by this author at: www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=17167168