

New Hope Sermon: Mary and Joseph's Encounters with God – “Scandal and Shame”

One of the most powerful ways that God brings the scriptures into our hearts is when we understand what the scripture incident or promise meant in the context of the hearers. So today I want us to walk in Mary and Joseph's shoes in terms of their culture and see what their response cost them when they separately encountered the angel of the Lord. We need to be so careful we do not sanitize the Scriptures and thus rob them of their intended impact. The Christmas story has become so familiar that we have done that in so many parts of the story. Therefore, from their perspective our theme today is Scandal and Shame. This means we look at their stories from the viewpoint of the collectivistic culture in which they lived. Their faith journey was NOT just lived out in their own individual obedience or disobedience to God's call. This is the emphasis of Western Christianity; it may be culturally relevant to our context but it is not completely biblical. Mary and Joseph's costly obedience was lived out in the midst of a community where their identity and worth was centered. Scandal and shame.

Let me explain the power of collectivism: “the interdependent or collectivistic self is fundamentally connected to the social context. As such, one's sense of self depends on and is defined in part by those around them and is primarily manifested in public, overt behavior. As such, the organization of the self is guided by using others as a referent. That is, an interdependent individual uses the unexpressed thoughts, feelings, and beliefs of another person with whom they have a relationship with, as well as the other person's behaviors, to make decisions about their own internal attributes and actions.”
Markus, H. R., & Kitayama, S. (1991). "Culture and the self: Implications for cognition, emotion, and motivation". Psychological Review. 98: 224-253.

As a contemporary example, a judge ordered two shoplifters in Atlanta Georgia to stand at a Wal-Mart entrance for eight hours, wearing signs that read, "I am a thief. I stole from Wal-Mart." "Maybe they'll think twice about doing it," said store manager Neil Hawkins. Associated Press, "Judge Orders Shoplifters to Wear 'I'm a Thief' Signs"; dailymail.co.uk (5-7-07). He was counting on the power of shame as a powerful penalty that would keep them from shoplifting in the future.

Another contemporary example shows how a community reacts to disgraceful behavior by shunning:

Not long ago in Jerusalem's famed Hadassh Hospital, an Israeli soldier lay dying. He had contracted AIDS as a result of his gay lifestyle and was now in the last stages of the disease's terrible course. His father was a famous Jerusalem rabbi, and both he and the rest of his family had disowned the son. He was condemned to die in his shame. The nursing staff on his floor knew his story and carefully avoided his room. Everyone was simply waiting for his life to expire.

The soldier happened to be part of a regiment that patrolled the Occupied West Bank, and his unit was known for its ferocity and war-fighting skills. The Palestinians living in occupation hated these troops. They were merciless and could be cruel. Their green berets always gave them away.

One evening the soldier went into cardiac arrest. All the usual alarms went off, but the nursing staff did not respond. Even the doctors looked the other way. [That is how a community shames an individual who has brought them disgrace. I think this may have been the cost Mary and Joseph faced, but we will get to that.] On that floor another man was at work—a Palestinian Christian janitor—who knew this story as well and also knew the meaning of the emergency. *Incredibly, he was a man whose village had been attacked by this soldier's unit.* When the Palestinian heard the alarm and witnessed the neglect, his heart was filled with compassion. He dropped his broom, entered the soldier's room, and attempted to resuscitate the man by giving him cardiopulmonary resuscitation. The scene was remarkable: a poor

Palestinian man, a victim of this soldier's violence, now tried to save his enemy while those who should have been doing this stood on the sidelines. Gary M. Burge, *Jesus, the Middle-Eastern Storyteller* (Zondervan, 2009), pp. 24-25

Can you sense the terrible implications of scandal and shame?

Now let's connect this collectivistic power of shame to Mary and Joseph's story through Joseph's eyes.

"In Middle Eastern culture Mary and Joseph were already in the betrothal stage of coming marriage. In a formal prenuptial arrangement before witnesses they had pledged themselves to one another... This was a legally binding contract which gave the young man legal rights over the woman and it could only be broken by divorce, publicly or privately... In Galilee sexual relations between the betrothed partners were not tolerated and the girl did not leave her own family to live with the man. Sexual unfaithfulness at this stage was considered adultery, the penalty for which was death by stoning (NIV Application Commentary, Matthew, Michael Wilkins p.74).

Immediately after the conception of the child by the Holy Spirit, Mary had left to be with Elizabeth for 3 months. When she returned, she was 4 months pregnant and her condition became known to Joseph. Her pregnancy would create a scandal for her family and also for Joseph because he was a righteous man who kept the law blamelessly. His only recourse was to divorce her. But if he did it publically, her pregnancy would be known in the community and she would likely be stoned. So he decided to divorce her privately. In love, this is how he decided to protect Mary and even his own reputation.

But then the angel of God, Gabriel again, intervened and spoke to Joseph in a dream. He told Joseph that Mary's child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and he was to go ahead with the wedding ceremony immediately and wed Mary. The angel also told Joseph what to name the child and what the child's mission was to be: v. 22: *You are to give him the name Jesus because he will save his people from their sins.*"

Interestingly, when the angel appears to Joseph, his first words are "*Do not be afraid to take Mary home to be your wife.*" V.20 The angel was acknowledging the implications of shame and scandal to Joseph as well as Mary when it would be discovered that she gives birth too soon after the wedding. But Joseph listens to the angel, not to the potential fears from his community's reaction. He immediately finalized the betrothal period with a formal wedding ceremony and took Mary home with him as his wife (Wilkins, pp. 73-77).

Mary and Joseph each had to answer directly to God. They chose, in their response to their Encounters, not to base their obedience on how they thought the other would respond to them or how their community would react. They truly listened; they did not pretend not to listen, like this little boy: "**Dad:** Max! Why didn't you answer me when I called you? **Max:** I didn't hear you, Dad. **Dad:** What do you mean you didn't hear me? Max does not respond. **Dad:** How many times didn't you hear me? **Max:** I don't know, maybe three or four times." *Lee Eclow, Vernon Hills, Illinois*

No, M + J each listened, alright. Mary's response to the angel's proclamation was "*I am the Lord's servant. Let it be done to me as you have said.*" Joseph's was to not divorce Mary but to marry her instead. It was a very costly obedience for each of them on at least 3 levels.

First, in terms of their individual walk with God, obedience or doubt/disobedience has immediate repercussions as we saw in Zachariah encounter with the Angel. They chose to heed and obey.

Second, the fact that they were a couple could not be factored in. They chose to live the result of that choice however it might affect their relationship with each other. This is a lesson for all those in intimate relationships. We must put God, not the other, first.

And third, their obedience was costly in a collectivistic society. Mary's pregnancy before marriage was scandalous and would cause a profound shaming and shunning in their community. Who ever heard of a virgin birth? Even today, the scandal of the virgin birth is impossible to conceive of in our scientific age. So people doubt the truth of the gospel narrative on a rational basis. Mary and Joseph had to contend with the emotional response of members of their community to a law that was sacred within the protocol of engaged couples. They would be shunned and shamed and slandered in ways that I'm sure cut deeply within their minds and hearts. It was only God who would walk with them through that. A costly obedience indeed. But still, they heard the call of God through the angel and they obeyed. Are we willing to do that?

Obedying starts first with recognizing God's voice. God still speaks to us, so this is not a mythical option. This week I read an anthology of Christmas stories. This true story is about hearing and obeying. It happened to Elizabeth in Charlotte North Carolina in 1949:

Herman and I finally locked our store and dragged ourselves home to south Caldwell Street in Charlotte, N.C. at 11:00 pm, Christmas Eve. We were dogged tired. Ours was one of those big old general appliance stores that sold everything from refrigerators and toasters and record players to bicycles and doll houses and games. We had sold almost all of our toys; and all of the layaways except one package had been picked up... The person who put a dollar down on that package, never appeared.

Early Christmas morning our 12 year old son, Tom, and Herman and I were out under the tree opening up gifts. But it was all very humdrum... As soon as breakfast was over, Herman left to visit his friend next door and Tom disappeared into the bedroom, mumbling, 'I'm going back to sleep. There's nothing left to stay up for anymore.' So there I was alone, doing the dishes and feeling very let down. It was 9:00 am and sleet mixed with snow cut the air outside. The wind rattled our windows and I felt grateful for the warmth of the apartment. "So glad I don't have to go out on a day like today," I thought to myself, picking up the wrapping and ribbons strewn around the living room.

And then it began. Something I've never experienced before. A strange persistent urge. "Go to the store," it seemed to say. I looked at the icy sidewalk outside. "That's crazy," I said to myself. I tried dismissing the thought, but it wouldn't leave me alone. "Go to the store." Well, I wasn't going to go. I'd never gone to the store on Christmas day in all the 10 years we owned it. No one opened shop on that day. There wasn't any reason to go. I didn't want to, and I wasn't going to. For an hour I fought that strange feeling. Finally, I couldn't stand it any longer. I got dressed. "Tom," I said, feeling silly, 'I think I'll walk down to the store.' Tom woke up with a start. "Whatever for? What are you going to do there?" "Oh, I don't know," I said lamely. "There's not much to do here; I just think I'll wander down." He argued against it a little, but I told him that I'd be back soon. "Well, go on," he grumped, "but I don't see any reason for it."

I put on my grey wool coat and a grey tam on my head, then my galoshes and my red scarf and gloves. Once outside, none of these garments helped. The wind cut right through me, and the sleet stung my cheeks. I groped my way along the mile down to the store, slipping and sliding all the way... I felt ridiculous. I had no business being out in that bitter chill.

But when I reached the store I gasped: "What in the world?" In front of the store stood two little boys, huddled together, one about 9 and the other 6. "Here she comes!" yelled the older

one. He had his arms around the younger. “See? I told you she would come,” he said jubilantly. The two little children were half frozen. The younger’s one’s face was wet with tears, but when he saw me, his eyes opened wide and his sobbing stopped.

“What are you two children doing out here in this freezing rain?” I scolded, hurrying them into the store and turning up the heat... They were poorly dressed. They had no hats or gloves; their shoes barely held together. I rubbed their small, icy hands and got them up close to the heater. “We’ve been waiting for you,” replied the oldest. They had been standing outside since 9am, the time I normally opened the door.

“Why were you waiting for me?” I asked, astonished. “My little brother, Jimmie, didn’t get any Christmas” the older one said as he touched Jimmy’s shoulder. “We want to buy some skates. That’s what he wants. We have these three dollars. See, miss Lady,” drawing the money from his pocket. I looked at the dollars in his hands. I looked at their expectant faces. Then I looked around the store. “I’m sorry,” I said, “but we’ve sold almost everything. We have no ska...”

Then my eyes caught sight of the lay-away shelf with its one lone passage. I tried to remember...could it be? “Wait a minute,” I told the boys. I walked over, picked up the package unwrapped it and, miracle of miracles, there was a pair of skates! Jimmy reached for them. “Lord,” I prayed silently. “Let them be his size.” And miracle added upon miracles, they were his size. When the older boy finished tying the laces on Jimmy’s right foot and saw that the skates fit...perfectly..., he stood up and presented the dollars to me.

“No, I’m not going to take your money,” I said. “I want you to have these skates and I want you to use this money to get new gloves for your hands.” The two boys just blinked at first. But then their eyes became like saucers and their grins stretched wide when they understood... What I saw in Jimmy’s eyes was a blessing. It was pure joy...

After the children had warmed up, I turned down the heater and we walked out together. As I locked the door, I turned to the older brother and said, “How lucky that I happened to come along when I did. If you had stood there much longer, you’d have frozen. But how did you boys know I would come?” I wasn’t prepared for his reply. His gaze was steady and he answered my softly, “I knew you would come... I asked Jesus to send you.” The tingles in my spine weren’t from the cold; I knew God had planned this... The one thing that made that Christmas really wonderful was the one thing that makes every Christmas wonderful - Jesus was there.” Elizabeth King English, “Waiting ...Waiting for Christmas,” in *Christmas in My Heart, a Treasure of Timeless Christmas Stories*, ed. Joe Wheeler, Tyndale House Publishers, 2000, pp. 2-6.

Jesus spoke to Elizabeth – not once but twice, and kept speaking until she obeyed. That’s His mercy and He will still do that. Remember in her obedience, she walked a mile in an icy wind and against all reason. But she obeyed. And that’s what we are called to do – obey no matter the consequences.

This is what Mary and Joseph did. First they listened, then they obeyed the voice of the angel, knowing the cost of scandal and shame from their community.

What is God calling you to do this holiday? How costly will your obedience be? It doesn’t matter when we are trusting ourselves to the God of the universe. He can make the impossible happen and use us in amazing ways, once we say, “*I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said.*”

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.

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