

Sermon “Especially in the Brokenness”

Kirk of St James

Sunday December 21, 2025

Rev. Amanda Henderson-Bolton

Over the past month our book study group has been engaged in a discussion about the opening chapters of the four gospels (among other things). Each gospel writer has chosen to open their respective books at different points in Jesus’ life. Mark who wrote the earliest book skips the entire first half of Jesus’ life and picks up at his baptism and then launches straight into his ministry. It is generally agreed on that Matthew and Luke wrote next, using both Mark’s works and an additional source known as “Q” to write their gospels. John wrote last, and again chooses to start his gospel later on in Jesus’ life before his first miracle at Cana. Each writer pulled stories from the life of Jesus and arranged them in a way that spoke to the needs of the communities they were writing for, and while there is indeed a great deal of overlap particularly between Matthew, Mark and Luke, there are also some differences.

On Christmas Eve you may notice that we tend to switch our readings between Matthew and Luke because each of them covers a different aspect of Jesus’ birth narrative. It is a little like reading a book with different points of view from different characters. For example, Luke delves into Mary, the appearance by the angel, and the Magnificat. Do you know that if we did not have the book of Luke, we would not have songs like “Angels We Have Heard on High”? On the flip side it is the book of Matthew that includes Joseph’s perspective on what was happening, and this part of the narrative is more complicated.

The first Christmas as we understand it now did not start with a neat scene, singing angels and a bright star. Instead, it started in scandal, the assumption of adultery, and a possible divorce. We tend to think of Christmas as a time when we strive for a sense of “perfection,” or at the very least attempt to have our to-do list all crossed off. However, if we were to think about our lives it is likely that some of the most chaotic and what we might consider failures ended up being more grace filled and more faithful than they may have otherwise been. That is why I like the gospel of Matthew, it makes space for the messiness, and out of it something incredible emerges.

Since Chad and I have been married our Christmas' have become more complicated as a number of major difficult situations have overlapped our holidays. Chad has taken to calling the Christmas season the disaster window in our household. It tends to bring what should be the joy of the season into direct tension with the struggles and anxieties. I am certain you have likely experienced Christmas' much like this yourself. When moments that weigh heavy on our hearts come up against the bright lights and jolliness of the season, we can find ourselves in inner turmoil. Dr Judith Orloff points out that "Forced happiness makes us feel more sad, upset and lonely because we are faking our feelings." Therefore, Christmas can become a vicious cycle as we feel the need to try and carry on the faith and frivolity of the season.

As we set up our nativity scenes the characters have looks of gentle awe and wonder, while they stand neatly in their allotted place. Perhaps we look at those neat, uncomplicated figures and think there is no place for us by this manger. Our lives are too sad, too messy, too complicated and too broken for that smiling baby to take care of. This scene is one for people with their lives together, presents wrapped, and turkeys waiting to be cooked.

What we forget in these perfect little scenes is the absolute scandal and messiness involved in the birth of Christ. From his lineage to arrival there is a great deal of eyebrow raising material. For example, listed among the names of Jesus family tree is Rahab, the prostitute from Jericho who helps the spies of Joshua escape the city. For helping them her family is spared when the city falls and is sacked.

Then there is our Bible reading today. You can bet the tongues were wagging around Nazareth when young Mary found herself expecting. Joseph must assume that she was unfaithful, and her actions would have been considered adultery. As one scholar noted "Joseph is described as a righteous man. This means he must divorce his unfaithful wife; the law does not allow him to "forgive and forget."" While it is Joseph's duty to divorce Mary, he does not want to publicly shame her for her adultery. Instead, he will quietly divorce her and move on with his life, which is until an angel appears and tells him the most unbelievable story ever.

We are so used to it that we do not even think about it anymore. We know how this story goes. We know about the journey and the angels and the shepherds and who this baby would grow up to be. But Joseph? He had no idea. He could have woken up and attributed the whole thing to a weird dream or an off meal. Maybe he had simply been out in the sun too long. One scholar accurately summed up the message from the angel as follows: “I know this is not what you expected, Joseph, but it is going to be okay. God is about to do something wonderful, despite the fact that according to Jewish custom and law you are in a rather socially unacceptable situation.”

So, despite the scandal and the gossiping neighbours and the rumors that must have circulated about this righteous man and young woman they shrugged them off and persevered. And when the time comes for his young son to be named, Joseph names him. That is significant, because bestowing a name effectively means that he has adopted Jesus as his own and this legally incorporates him into the genealogy of David. In the ancient world the naming of a child by the father meant that they were accepted into the family. In the Roman empire a father could deny a name and the child would be cast out and left for dead, or, if “lucky” enough to be found to grow up in a life of slavery and servitude. Joseph received an almost unbelievable set of instructions that made no sense and had no precedent in history and trusts God enough to follow through.

As one scholar said “That is the message part of this text brings—that unexpected things, things outside of convention can often be wonderful signs that God is at work. Amid all our less-than-picture-perfect Christmases, the Christmas trees that are not quite as perfect as we want them to be, the lives that are not as perfect as we want them to be, God does something utterly new.” The manger is exactly the place where we should bring our brokenness, our sadness, our anger, and our grief. The manger was never meant for perfection because nothing in the salvation story is perfect. Instead, it was a rag tag group of people who from generation to generation managed to muddle through and despite their failures chose to continue following God’s call in their lives.

Knowing as we do that God does not demand perfection how does that affect how we approach Christmas? As one article recently published proclaimed “it is okay to not be okay at Christmas.” It is okay to not feel jolly. As John Pavlovitz once wrote in an article entitled *To Those Who Struggle This Christmas*

“The way you feel today will not always be the way you feel. As difficult as it is to imagine in these painful moments—there will be holidays when lightness returns to you; days when you are cultivating new dreams again, when you once more feel secured in a place where you belong, when you again find yourself embraced by people who see and treasure the goodness in you, days when you are easily pushing back your demons. There will be holidays when celebration is your default setting. But right now, don’t feel any guilt for the sadness within you. Don’t beat yourself up for not wanting to sing right now. Don’t feel pressured to have the stuff together that simply isn’t together and won’t be for a while. Just receive this Christmas as it is, receive it as *you* are—with all the struggle and uncertainty and grieving it brings. I’m not writing this to everyone, but if I’ve written this for you, be greatly encouraged. You are loved.”

We are loved by Immanuel God with us just as we are. There is room for everyone at this manger. If you are feeling the joy of Christmas and celebrating is easy--give thanks. And if you are feeling broken and bruised and less than perfect don’t be afraid to lay it all down manger-side. Jesus entered the messiness of this world in order to walk alongside of us. However the Christ child finds you this Christmas season, may you know, down to the very marrow of your bones, that you are loved just as you are.