

Becoming Children of God

Sermon 45 | Greystone Baptist Church | January 5, 2020

John 1: 1-18

In a Russian art museum hangs an oil painting created by the famous Dutch artist, Rembrandt. The masterpiece shows Mary, the mother of Jesus, sitting low in a chair, in what looks to be Joseph's carpentry workshop. You can see Joseph, if you look closely, working on a piece of wood faintly in the background just above Mary's head. Mary is the focus of this 17th century nativity scene. The light illumines her face and her body more than the others pictured. In her left hand we see a book, presumably the Bible, with ruffled pages as if to suggest that she has read them over and over again. But her gaze points us to her right hand, resting on the cradle where the baby sleeps propped up by pillows and wrapped in blankets.

This nativity scene is different from the ones displayed on our mantles and in church lawns during the Christmas season. It is different from the accounts of Matthew and Luke from which our traditional nativities and Christmas pageants are created. Here, there are no shepherds or magi. There is no star or manger. There are no livestock, only Mary, Joseph, the baby, and some angels settling into Joseph's workshop.

Here, in this scene, the artist has interpreted the story of Jesus' birth for his own day and age. Taking the truth of the incarnation and dressing it up in his contemporary setting. In doing so, he tells the story of Jesus' birth through his own lens and lived experience. Jesus wouldn't have laid in a wicker basket, plush with pillows and blankets. Joseph wouldn't have the same kind of shop set with Dutch tools from the 1600s. Most of all, Mary couldn't have held a Bible in her hand because no such thing existed in the world of the original Nativity.

Before we get too upset with Rembrandt for his interpretive leap, let's try to remember that Gospels in our Bibles do the same thing. Each tells a unique story about the incarnation – interpreted for their time and within the context of their communities. We forget this because it's all ancient history for us, and also perhaps we have grown attached to our pageantry that insists upon shepherds and wise men making a combined pilgrimage to the manger. If we read closely though, we might notice that the three Synoptic Gospels – Matthew, Mark, and Luke - they each begin a little differently, calling us back to specific people who were pillars of the Hebrew faith. Matthew uses an extensive genealogy to tie Jesus to Abraham. Luke calls Jesus the "firstborn son" and reminds us of the first man, Adam. Mark doesn't include a birth story at all, but instead he tells a baptism story, using the prophetic tradition of John the Baptist and Elijah before him as Jesus' claim and connection to Israel's past.

And then we come to today's reading from John chapter 1. Using more poetry than prose, John's story harkens back to the beginning... the very beginning. Not just the

baptism, not just the birth of Jesus, but something before all of that... the birth of the people, the birth of the world, the birth of God's creation.

*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the word was God...*

reminds us of

In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth...

and it shows us that for John, the birth of Jesus is not characterized or contained by a specific place or person in the past... rather it is a continuation of God's unfolding relationship with the humankind and all of creation. For John, the story that will unfold is a continuation of what started thousands of years ago, when God began creating. John's is a cosmic tale that places the incarnation of Jesus within the Hebrew tradition, affirming that Jesus is the messiah, a prophet, a descendant of Abraham and Adam... but that Jesus is also something more. John's prologue, sets up Jesus as the one through which the prophets, and the law, and the world itself are to be interpreted.

Looking again at Rembrandt's art, the relationship between book and child become more pronounced. I wonder if Rembrandt created this masterpiece after reading John's account of the incarnation?

I wonder if Mary, as she held the Hebrew scriptures in her one hand and her baby in the other... I wonder if she had more questions than answers?
The scriptures said that the messiah would be a King...
that he would be the savior, the liberator for the whole world...
and yet he must have felt so small to hold, so powerless, and so vulnerable in her arms.
How could all of those realities be true?

It's almost as if Mary is accustomed to finding her way in the books of scripture, but now she is being pulled toward the child. Her face and her body move closer to the child who (even as he sleeps) demands her attention. One scholar writes: "Whether or not Rembrandt intended it, the painting is an icon of different ways to encounter and understand the word of God. On the one hand, there is the Bible, the book that Mary has been reading as Jesus sleeps and Joseph works in the background. The Word of God is to be found in the Scriptures. We read the words and find we are addressed by the word of God. We read them again and again... [but Mary] ...does not ponder the page alone. She also ponders the infant beside her, 'the Word made flesh,' rather than the Word made paper and ink. [This] Word is a blood-warmed, breath-enlivened creature sleeping beside his mother." (Thomas Troeger, *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, p.191*) When Mary returns to the book, she might find the words read a little differently now, given her experience with the child.

The parents in the room might be feeling a little connection with Rembrandt's Mary right now as this is a common experience in parenting. We prepare for babies by reading books, articles, blog posts, and listening to the advice of the experts. When Justin and I were expecting Mia, I read the classic, *What to Expect When You're Expecting*, as well as countless blogs on cloth diapering, necessary baby supplies, and sleep training techniques. And when our baby did arrive, I started applying all of my research only to discover (rather quickly) that simply surviving with an infant was much harder than following the step-by-step instructions provided by the parenting expert of the day. Each day was a new day, a new adventure in uncharted territory. I found myself looking a little like Mary does in Rembrandt's masterpiece holding the baby in one hand and the guidebook in the other... often with more questions than answers.

As it turns out, parenting is far messier work than any book could ever convey. The words on the page are just a glimpse of the difficult, messy, improvisation that parenting requires. Because when we embark on the sacred journey of raising a child, we are binding ourselves to another human, with all the flaws, the fears, the uncertainty, the limitation, the mess, the emotion, the pain, the unpredictability... all of it is vulnerable, all of it is risky... and there is no way that any book or expert advice could ever fully prepare us for it.

As a matter of fact, parenting isn't the only example to teach us about the messiness of our humanity. Every authentic human relationship is messy.

How many of us have a complicated marriage, one that our friends might not understand or one that doesn't exactly fit into the logic of a pro / con list?

Or how about our closest friendships? The ones we have had for so many years we begin to feel like family... when we can expose the worst sides of ourselves and trust the other not to judge us or try to change us, but to love us as we are and help us find a way forward?

The truth is that any of us who have any relationships at all understand that to be human is to be imperfect. To be human is to be complicated and flawed, and messy.

...And even still, God chose to become one of us. Taking on our human messiness in the form of a child that would be held in Mary's arms, helping her – and helping us – interpret the words on the page.

In some ways it is a shame we only read the prologue, the introduction to John's Gospel. It gives us a little taste of what we will find when we keep on reading. In the chapters that follow, we discover a God who so desired relationship with humanity that God took on human form. With all its complexity, with all its shortcoming, with all its mess. God became one of us. God became one of us so that we could see and learn how to interpret the word for our world... so that we could see the light shining in the darkness.

© Chrissy Tatum Williamson & Greystone Baptist Church

It is a shame we couldn't read the whole story because, in the chapters that follow, Jesus, who is the word made flesh, will push the boundaries of scripture doing things like turning over tables in the temple, conversing with Samaritans, and healing on the Sabbath. These actions were offensive to some whose eyes were only familiar with scripture. But for those who, like Rembrandt's Mary, could let the messy child inform their understanding of the words, the light was set free from the pages and allowed to come alive.

This is exactly the kind of incarnation we need to practice in our own lives. Sooner or later we all learned that our parenting strategies could never look exactly like the formulas presented in the best-selling books. People are messy. But have we learned the same thing about our embodied practice of faith? Have we learned scripture, are the pages of our Bibles well-worn because we have read them over and over again? And if so, have we begun the messy practice of learning the world through our relationships with one another? I might wager that we are better at learning scripture and hoping that our lives will be simple and tidy like the words on the page. "Do this, don't do that... say this prayer, believe these things, go to church at these times... expect the same of everybody else." It sure would be simpler that way.

But John's Gospel reminds us that the God we worship is not confined to words on a page, to static rules and unchanging doctrines. Our God is one who practiced incarnation, who took on human skin in order to live in our mess, to live in human relationship with us, showing us how to interpret and apply the scripture for our time in a way that always sought to expand the table, to struggle alongside us in our brokenness, and to love those who we didn't see fit to love - even if that someone is ourself.

We are, once again, at the brink of a new year. This is a natural time of setting new goals, of moving forward beyond the past, of starting anew... we are in a time of re-creation. Many of us may have already set some resolutions for the year. Many of us may have already fallen short of some of those resolutions. But I propose a different kind of resolution for us to consider.

Let's make 2020 a year of incarnate living.

What does that mean? It means that we live the way that Jesus, the word made flesh, taught us to live. First, it means that we are truthful with ourselves and one another. Truthful about who we are and who we are not. Truthful about our strength and our frailty, truthful about our successes and our failures, truthful about our hopes and our dreams. Truthful about our own messiness.

And it also means that as we grow in truth with ourselves, with one another and with our incarnate God, that we grow in grace. Grace that is modeled by God's willingness to become one of us. Grace that is shown in the life of Jesus who interpreted scripture for his world. Grace that is known in the expansion of God's word from the page to the real

world. Grace that understands and accepts human messiness and still chooses to jump into the mess. Grace to let the mess inform our reading of scripture and our practice of faith. ...Grace that helps us listen to one another, welcome one another, and support one another every step of the way.

No matter who we are. No matter where we come from.
Broken and messy as we may be.

For if we want to become children of God, it all begins with incarnation.