

Scandal into Joy

a sermon

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December 18, 2016

Matthew 1:18–25

Joseph was a good man. He was kind. He was fair and just.

But Joseph was in a tough situation. He was engaged to a young woman named Mary. And he had just learned that she was pregnant. He had nothing to do with that. It wasn't his baby.

What should he do? He couldn't go on as if everything was okay. It wasn't okay. He couldn't continue as if everything was fine. It wasn't fine. He couldn't act as if he was the father. He was not the father.

All that he knew about right and wrong, about good and bad, about God's will, about God's law — all of that told him that this was bad, and he could no longer get married to that girl.

Joseph was a good man. He was kind. He was fair and just. He didn't want to make a big deal about this. He had no desire to ruin Mary's life over this.

And he could have. He could have humiliated her publicly. He could have exposed her to religious judgment and punishment. He could have made sure that she would suffer for her mistake.

But he didn't want that.

Because Joseph was a good man. He was kind. He was fair and just.

So, Joseph decided that the best he could do, in this bad situation, was to end the engagement quietly. He would just let Mary go, and *he* ... well, he'd just go *on*, wounded but wiser.

And then something happened that turned everything around.

It began with an angel's dream-piercing whisper, which woke Joseph:

woke him from despair,
woke him from sorrow,
woke him from defeat,
woke him from giving up,
woke him from thinking the worst.

And having been whispered to and awoken, Joseph sees things in a completely new way.

What he thought was shameful was instead a miracle.

What he had thought was an all-too-human embarrassment was instead
filled with God-given meaning.

And what he had felt was a scandal was instead being turned into joy.

Because this unexpected child whom Joseph must now welcome would be the choice of God, the power of God,

to love, to save,
to forgive, to heal,
to feed, to share,
all for joy,
great joy,
tidings of comfort and joy.



You know, I think we can learn something really important from Joseph. He probably didn't set out to do this, but he can teach us something, something about Jesus, something about God ... and something about us.

Because with what happened to Joseph, even before Jesus is born, we see something about Jesus that we see again and again throughout his ministry. And really, it lies at the center of all that Jesus is, all that he does, all that he means: how in *him*, in Jesus, in who he is and in what he does, God is turning

bad news into good news,
despair into hope,
shame into blessing,
scandal into joy.

You see, Jesus *was* a scandal. We need to realize this, and remember this. Because when we forget this, then

we sanitize him,
we domesticate him,
we sentimentalize him,
we airbrush him,
we turn him into a greeting card,
two dimensional and sappy.

And when we do that, we forget who he really is and what he really does.
A scandal? Yes, a scandal.

His origins were uncertain.
His words were a puzzle.
His friends were a disgrace.
His behavior was an embarrassment.
His message was an incitement.

Jesus startled others with what he did and shocked them by what he said. And what they in turn said about him was that he was a sinner-forgiving, leper-embracing, tax collector-partying, prostitute-consorting "holy man" who was not so holy after all. He struck them as a walking, talking, teaching *scandal*.

And then there was the biggest scandal of all, a scandal that fell particularly hard on those who followed him, bringing them deep sorrow and great pain, when they saw his beaten body lifted up on a cross, later to be taken down and laid in a tomb to rot.

How do you revere an executed rabbi? How do you follow a dead Messiah? How do you honor a broken Christ?

From uncertain beginning to darkest apparent end, the story of Jesus was marked by scandal.

And that was as it was supposed to be.

For by all this scandal Jesus Christ brought

 blessing to the lost,
 comfort to the despairing,
 honor to the shame-filled,
 joy to the scandal-ridden.

Because in Jesus, God decided to set things right. In Jesus, God chose to save us.



How? By avoiding scandal? In bypassing the unpleasant? With detours around the disappointing? By ignoring the shameful?

Perhaps we think that's how it would work, should work, with God going around the scandalous and the broken, steering clear of all in life that is so less than perfect.

Many people seem to have this understanding of God. They think of God keeping a good distance from all that is grubby and disappointing, perched safely far away on a celestial throne.

And maybe that's why many people, even some Christians, stay away from church. They don't feel that they're good enough to show up. Their less-than-perfect lives, the shame they bear, the scandals that haunt them and weigh them down — they fear all these will be seen by God, and by others, provoking judgment and disgust. And they cannot bear it.

And maybe that's why some Christians are not so good around the broken and the fallen, in fact pretty horrible around them. Some feel uneasy with and scandalized by the shame of others. Aren't they whom good people should avoid? Don't they have a contagion we should be wary of contracting? "Mind the company you keep." The less-than-perfect lives of those whom we tend to judge, the scandals that weigh *them* down, the shame that clings to them — we fear that all these will be seen by God, and by others, provoking judgment and disgust of *us* who would associate with them. And we cannot bear it.

But no. *No.* Jesus shows us: God is *not*

 a detour God,
 a "can't touch this" God,
 a germaphobic God,
 a shaming God.

Jesus shows us: God *is*

the God of judgment *and* mercy,
the God of holiness *and* grace,
the God of eternity *and* time,
the God of heaven *and* earth,
the God of purity *and* comfort,
the God of truth *and* love.

In Jesus, we meet and are met by the one true God, who sets things right and brings us salvation ...

by plunging into our imperfection,
by embracing our shame,
by turning our scandal into joy,
by becoming one with us,
“God with us,”
“Emmanuel,”
suffering servant,
Lamb of God.

For in the sorrow and struggle of Jesus Christ, in Christ’s coming into our midst and joining with us in *our* sorrow and struggle, God was, and is, joyously at work:

to love, to save,
to forgive, to heal,
to feed, to share,
all for joy,
great joy,
tidings of comfort and joy.

And that is why, for the Christian, the Christmas we await and for which we prepare throughout the twenty-eight days of Advent is about *joy*. Because we,

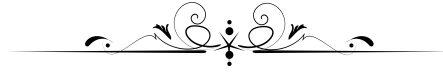
the scandal ridden,
the broken,
the confused,
the stumbling,
the rage-filled,
the wound-so-tight,
the disappointed —

we know Jesus, and so we know that God has taken the scandalous and turned it into joy, and will do so again and again.

For the comfort of Christmas is not finally, ultimately, in the love of family and friends, nor in the exchanging of gifts. It is not found securely in a celebration of human good will. As important as all of these are (and they *are* important) they are not what *secure* our joy.

Instead, the comfort of Christmas is in knowing Jesus as the decision of God to join us in our scandalous lives, making of us much more than our scandals, so that we may join with Christ,

to love, to bless,
to forgive, to heal,
to feed, to share,
all for joy,
 great joy,
 tidings of comfort and joy.



My friends, as we make our way through Advent toward Christmas just a week away, toward that celebration of the Incarnation of God's Son, he who brings joy and is the *embodiment* of joy, I ask you all

to look for the joy our Lord Jesus is bringing within and out of your shame,
to rejoice over those miracles of scandal embracing and transforming joy,
and to share this joy with others,
 the broken and the whole,
 the lost and the found,
all for the glory of Jesus.