

*Advent 4, Year A*

*December 18, 2016*

*ECOHS, Cumming*

Stories are an important part of what it means to be human. Stories help to create our identity as individuals and as groups of people, like nations and religions. If I asked you to tell me about yourself, after giving your name and maybe your occupation, and your family demographics, you would probably tell a short story about yourself or your kin.

One of my default stories is that I was born to older parents—Mom was almost 41 and Dad was 45 when I was born. That was back before being an older parent was a thing and was cool. You might hear me say that I prefer to think of myself as a surprise, not a mistake. There are layers of meaning in that little story and if you listen closely, they reveal something of how I grew up and how I turned out and how I keep turning out today.

So when we read Scripture, like today's Gospel, we are hearing a short story that tells us something important about the people at the origin of our religion, what became the Christian faith. We don't have a record of how the story was passed on exactly. We assume Mary told someone who told someone who eventually wrote it down.

But the thing is, there were probably dozens and dozens of short stories like this one about Mary and Joseph, stories that did not make the cut, so to speak. In fact, Mark's Gospel and John's Gospel do not talk at all about Mary's miraculous pregnancy and how Joseph reacted. Yet those Gospels still tell us that Jesus is the Son of God and Messiah, but through other means, other stories and words.

The story that Matthew tells us has three main elements. They may seem inconsistent with what we would think of about the birth of the Savior of the World. First, it is about a relatively obscure couple—not famous or powerful or rich. Second, the story tells about something unexpected that would have been very disapproved of in that day—a young woman becoming pregnant before she was married. Mary could have been killed or more likely ostracized. Third, there is a dramatic change by the end of the story—Joseph accepts Mary's pregnancy as God's work. Yet it is still very much uncertain for them how this will play out.

Now as he wrote his Gospel, Matthew—and the rest of us who have read or heard it over centuries—knew how the rest of the story turned out. We believe that Mary's Son was also God's Son and that his birth was the beginning of a new relationship between God and humanity and among humanity based on God's love revealed in that little baby boy.

But the author could have told this story in a different way—without the obscure couple or the scandalous, surprise pregnancy, or the uncertainty about the end result. Why did the human author—under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit—choose this way of telling the story?

What are the layers of meaning we can find there? At least part of the meaning is that God still comes among us in obscure, scandalous, and uncertain ways to make God's ways known to us.

Of course, Jesus' story is unique—he is the Son of God. But I believe Jesus is not jealous of his story. Jesus is the example of how God continues to come among us today in the same way he visited us back then. In fact our collect for today refers to God's daily visitation. God is with us—Immanuel—in these unexpected ways as we await the return of our Lord.

So what do these ongoing stories of God's presence tell us? How do they encourage us in our faith? I read a quote the other day that helps me to understand why these stories matter. It is from the folk music legend, Pete Seeger. I am not sure when it was written, but Pete died almost three years ago, so it was at least that long ago. Here is what he wrote:

“I'm convinced that if the world survives these dangerous times it will be tens of millions of small things that do it.”

That rings true to me and connects to the point of this story from the Gospel. God is at work today like God was at work two thousand years ago. God shows up in obscure places, under unexpected circumstances that many disapprove of, and with an outcome that is uncertain.

Like the story in Matthew's Gospel, God often shows up when a baby does. Based on Lynn and my experience and from talking with others, something just changes after you become a parent. That tiny human that you have felt inside its mother shows up with the beautiful, scrunched up face and you are in love. And you need to be because that baby is not only wonderful-- it is a lot of work. Middle of the night feedings and diaper changes and all the rest. But more than worth it all.

God shows up as we begin to get it—get at least in part how God feels about us. We can experience a deep compassion and tenderness as parents. We would give our life for our child. Our hopes and dreams for our child are for them to flourish. We are not able to feel all that with the purity of motives that God has, but we get it at least in part. God shows up.

God shows up in other ways related to parenting, too. It is not always like a Hallmark card or a Facebook post. Sometimes it gets really real.

Like when a mother feel exhausted and overwhelmed and a friend shows up and just listens. When the friend lets her know that she feels that way, too, and she does not make her feel like she is a bad mom for needing a break. It may not make the headlines or be recorded in Scripture, but it is a story we need to hear to let people feel God's presence and have hope that they can get through the terrible twos.

Or like when a couple has a hard time conceiving a child. That is a painful time especially when you have to hear about other families and their children. God shows up when people near to them come by to listen if they want to talk and support them even in silence or a

needed distraction. And God shows up when people can simply be present and resist offering advice about how to fix it.

God shows up even in difficult family situations, the ones we don't want to talk about or that we are just glad didn't happen to us or our family. Like when the police or DFACS and the courts get involved and a child is removed from its home. God shows up when someone in the system or the extended family notices and cares for a child during such a hard time. Even small gestures can make a difference when a child is unsure or even scared.

Our parish has made a difference in these tough times for children through our annual collection of Wendy's Bears. This ministry was inspired by Wendy Murphy many years ago. The bears we collect are given to the Juvenile and Family Court so their employees can share them with children who have been removed from their homes. Those stuffed bears let children know that someone cares—and God shows up again.

In the New Year, we are going to try to start another ministry where we can show up for the people who show up for the children in our county—DFACS caseworkers. The idea is to offer a chaplain program for them by people from our parish who can come alongside them. These caseworkers do such hard and important work. They are often unappreciated and can suffer from what is called "compassion fatigue." If we can help them to help children, we can be part of the stories that we need to hear about in our world.

To paraphrase Pete Seeger, there are tens of millions of things we can do to participate in God's goodness, God's kingdom, what God is doing to heal and make things right in the world. 9,999,900 +/- of these stories will never make the news, but they are no less important than the celebrities who hog the headlines. These stories are part of God's healing of our world and the bringing God's justice to earth. If we follow Jesus as our Lord and Savior, let us learn from and follow the story of his parents in being loving and faithful people in obscure, unexpected, and uncertain ways. Amen.