

ISAIAH 52:7-10 (NRSV)

How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation, who says to Zion, "Your God reigns."

Listen! Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem; for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem. The Lord has bared his holy arm before the eyes of all the nations; and all the ends of the earth shall see the salvation of our God.

LUKE 2:1-7 (NRSV)

In those days, a decree went out from the Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region, there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing the good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth lying in a manger. And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven,

and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

FAMILY SECRETS

Isaiah 52:7-10

Luke 2:1-20

In today's Western world where couples are waiting longer to say their "I dos" at the altar or simply permanently living together in a common-law situation, having a child out of wedlock raises no eyebrows in most segments of our society. People still want children even though they question the merits of being legally bound. Does the value of marriage outweigh its costs?

I had an opportunity to study firsthand the arguments on both sides of this question two months ago, when I attended the destination wedding of my wife's nephew in Portland, Maine. I assure you, it was quite a gala affair. Following the nuptials, we were all transported by bus to the reception which was held at a gorgeous rural location a half hour up the coast. And believe me, no expense was spared! The food was truly to die for and the seven-piece band with two vocalists which played for four hours of entertainment and dancing following the banquet is the most sought after in the Boston area. Pricey! I found out later that the cost of the food alone for 124 guests was \$250 per person. And that did not include the alcohol, the band or the

reception facilities. Start doing the math—we are talking upwards of \$50K for a wedding reception.

And then, of course, there was also the financial output required for all of the guests, none of whom live in the area. When we added up our family's airfare, rental car, 3 nights in Portland's finest hotel and our meals during the popular Columbus Day weekend at the peak of leaf season, our personal expenses were well over \$3K. Although this was clearly a high-end affair, it is the sort of experience that has become expected among the Millennial generation. Who can afford to get married? How much outlay of money do you expect from your guests to celebrate the occasion with you?

I explored the other side of the question with another of my wife's nephews who has been in a committed relationship for about three years. They both have their education and very good jobs, but there is some student debt they are still paying off. So, to save money for their future, they are currently living in the basement of his parent's home—and everybody is very happy with the arrangement. I have been counseling people for nearly 40 years so I ask a lot of questions. And I found out that, yes, they want to build a house and very much want to start a family, but they have no interest in the institution of marriage. And I think the weekend in Portland only solidified their reluctance.

But it hasn't been that many years ago that a woman who became pregnant outside of the bounds of marital bliss was sent away to have her child at a convent to avoid shaming her family. Everybody knew, of course, but would politely smile and nod when they were told she had relocated or was on an extended vacation.

In the ancient Near East at the time of Jesus' birth, being pregnant out of wedlock was not only a source of deep shaming which is reflected in our scripture for this morning, but was also punishable by stoning. In some Pakistani communities, that remains true even today. So, let's be honest, Mary's untimely pregnancy was a messy and potentially lethal problem. Exactly who was going to believe that an angel had appeared to her and that she would be

impregnated by the Holy Spirit?

Put yourself into the place of Joseph. The marriage was most likely arranged, a business deal between the parents. That was how it was done in that time and place. Romantic attachment did not precede the legal coupling, but ideally would evolve in the future. So, chances are 99 to 1 that Joseph had not slept with her; perhaps had only met her once or twice, leaving the case of patrimony up to everyone's imagination. Even had she been raped, it would not have altered the shaming that would have cast a dark shadow over the families and the couple. Yet, Joseph was a man of honor and he believed that his dream had revealed to him the truth of what Mary said. So, sticking with her given the cultural condemnation they both faced was an act of courage.

Remember too that we are likely talking about teenagers. Jewish males were expected to marry by 18 and sometimes did so as early as 14. And I assure you they were not wedding older women. So, this is a very young couple facing very complex problems. I expect that kids grew up faster in those days given the demands that life placed upon them. Nevertheless, Mary and Joseph did not have extensive life experiences to draw upon.

We are speculating here, but you might wonder why Joseph took Mary to Bethlehem to register for the census and to pay taxes which was his family's home and why we never hear a word about Mary's parents—ever! The likely reason was that she had been rejected by her family. And if Joseph's people were in Bethlehem at the time she went into labor, why did they not offer them shelter? Is it therefore not likely that Joseph's family too had a big problem with this young lady and did not want to be shamed in the community? Joseph's father was probably a carpenter who taught his son the trade who then taught his son (Jesus) the trade. They were a respectable and respected Bethlehem family. And Mary's family was undoubtedly of the same social status. Marriages were not arranged outside of one's class. So having no place else to go, they inquired for a room at a local inn. And perhaps there were no vacancies...or perhaps the innkeeper wanted no part of them either. In any event, they ended

up in the only place of refuge they could find—some neighbor's barn. And then Mary placed the squawking infant in a manger. Do you know what a manger is? It is a feeding trough for animals found inside of the barn. Jesus wasn't born in the nice, sterile environment of today's modern birthing rooms. He was born in filth. It was a messy beginning!

So why is this important? We romanticize Christmas with carols extolling an infant tender and mild as if he descended from above on a heavenly parachute. And while it is understandable that we attempt to separate the holy from the profane because we can't seem to get it straight in our minds that there is no difference, we really miss the point of Christmas when we try to elevate it above the realities of being human. Doing so sterilizes it. And it is anything but sterile.

How many of our lives are sterile? How many of our families have no secrets? How many of us want to have our histories exposed by Wiki Leaks? Show of hands, please! That's what I thought. Me either. We are human. Jesus was human. His parents were human. They had problems. They couldn't conceal them. They had to figure out how to make things work. They needed divine guidance just as we do. And that is what gives Christmas relevance today and will continue to give Christmas relevance as long as humanity survives on this earth. If we can't keep it real, it will be devoid of meaning.

As with many events in our lives, the meaning is often obscured by our fear of how we are being judged or the complications lying in our paths going forward or our general disillusionment with life or our disappointment in others who have failed to meet our expectations or our deep grief from losses we have experienced. From time to time, our lives simply become train wrecks. And that is precisely when our faith has the most meaning. *Listen!* says Isaiah. *Your sentinels lift up their voices, together they sing for joy; for in plain sight they see the return of the Lord to Zion. Break forth together into singing, you ruins of Jerusalem, for the Lord has comforted his people, he has redeemed Jerusalem.*

There is a light at the end of every tunnel. The light is the faithfulness of our God who

enters into the dungeons of our existence to be with us and to hold us in Divine arms when the night is at its darkest. And the same words that the angel spoke to the shepherds in the field, God speaks to us: *Do not be afraid, for see—I am bringing the good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.*

So on this blessed Christmas morning, let us rejoice together with the multitude of heavenly hosts, praising God and proclaiming: *Glory to God in the highest heaven and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”*

Merry Christmas, everyone!

Reverend Thomas Dunlap

December 25, 2016