Sermon Advent 3 Year C15, Texts: Genesis 12:1-9, Matthew 1:18-25

(May the words from my mouth and the meditations of my heart be always acceptable to you O Lord, my saviour and redeemer.)

This morning I want to talk about a different kind of perspective on the holidays, because what I have found quite fascinating over the years is that for every person who’s like, “yes, the holidays are coming,” you will find someone going, “yah, the holidays are coming.”

And for every person who’s like, “hey, I get to be with family,” you’ll find someone who’s like, “I’d rather go to jail than be with family…” And so yah, at this time of the year, when we feel like everybody is supposed to be happy, why is it also the time of the greatest depths of depression.

Why is it that for every person who’s like, “I can’t wait for the holidays,” there’s somebody else for whom the holidays drag up everything that’s wrong in their world. And maybe for some, it’s like, “yes, I’m looking forward to spending time with family and friends,” but for others, it’s a time when they’re reminded that they don’t have any family or friends.

And so I want to give you a perspective on the birth and life of Jesus that might actually be helpful for those who find that the next two weeks will have more pain than any other time of the year. And that perspective has it’s origins early, early on in the scriptures.

In Genesis, chapter 12, God speaks to Abraham, who is the father of the Jewish people, and God says to Abraham, “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse; and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.”

So central to the life of the Jewish community for thousands and thousands of years, was this belief that God was going to do something through the Jewish people that would bless and spill over throughout the entire world. And over time, through the scriptures, through the law and the prophets, the Jewish people were given more and more details about what this blessing was going to be like.

Now eventually, they came to understand that God was speaking of a messiah, of a savior who would be born, who would save not only the Jewish people, but would restore the nation of Israel, and extend God’s peace and harmony throughout the world.

So overtime, there was this growing expectation amongst the Jewish people that the messiah was coming, and that he was going to change the world. And so if you were a Jewish woman, who had a Jewish husband, and you were giving birth to a Jewish baby, in the midst of the pain and agony of childbirth, there was this possibility, this shimmer of consolation, that maybe, just maybe, you were giving birth to the messiah.

And so people looked to the scriptures for clues about where the messiah would be born. And while these clues were hotly debated, there was this group of people in the Galilee region who fixated on several verses from Isaiah. The first one was from Isaiah, chapter nine. “In the former time he brought into contempt the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the latter time he will make glorious the way of the sea, the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.”

Now along the northern shore of the Sea of Galilee was this hotbed of orthodox or fundamentalist Judaism. And if you lived in this region during the first century BC, you lived with this growing expectation that the messiah would be born in Galilee, and that his birth would be imminent.

In fact, one of the metaphors that the people of this region locked onto for the messiah comes again from Isaiah, chapter 11. “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding.” Now the stump of Jesse is a reference to the bloodline of King David. And so what Isaiah is doing here is saying the Jewish people are like this tree trunk, and out of this tree trunk is going to come this branch, this fresh young vibrant shoot, and this shoot is going to be the messiah.

There was even a town in the region of Galilee that was so convinced that the messiah was going to be born in their town, that they named their town shootville - at least that’s how we would translate it. The word for shoot in Hebrew is the word “netzer” and so they named their town “netzer-ette,” or in English, we would pronounce it Nazareth.

Now with this background in mind, you can start to see that with all of these messianic expectations in the air, that clear bloodlines and racial purity were crucial for their understanding of who they were, and what it meant to be a good Jew.

And so marriages were strictly controlled. Like if you were a Jewish girl, 13 or 14 years old, you would not be given in marriage to Harry the Hittite or Carl the Canaanite, because then you would have to take on your husband’s gods, and any child you would bear would be half-Jewish, which in their mind was bad enough, but it also meant that you were not ever going to give birth to the messiah.

So you can see why any sort of questionable circumstances surrounding a woman’s pregnancy just made their heads explode. Like if you got pregnant outside of marriage, or if you married someone other than a good Jewish boy, you were seen as a threat not only to the continuation of pure Jewish bloodlines in the Galilee, but you could also be preventing the birth of the messiah. I mean, that’s how seriously they viewed it.

Now if a child was born under questionable circumstances, that child was called a mamzer, and they were treated horribly. They were seen as a stain on society, and in a town were everybody knows everybody business, mamzers were kicked around, scorned, and marginalized throughout their entire lives.

And so with this in mind, let’s move to our gospel reading from Matthew. Now Matthew was Jewish, writing to a Jewish audience. He would have been knowledgeable of Jewish social conventions, and he would have been aware of this mamzer tag. So after tracing Jesus’ genealogy, which he says is Jewish, thought there are all sorts of suspicious people who join up along the way, he then talks about Jesus’ birth, and this is what he writes.

“Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.” Now if you’re Jewish and you hear this verse, you’re immediately thinking mamzer, that this child is illegitimate.

Sure Matthew says that she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit, but at that time, in that place, it would take the words of an angel to convince you that what Mary was carrying was anything other than a mamzer.

You know last week we talked about what being the mother of Jesus would have cost Mary, and how this pregnancy would have destroyed her reputation. But I think unless you’ve lived through something like this, it’s hard to understand the collective weight of every scornful look, every cold shoulder, every roll of the eyes, every hushed conversation, every accusation … And yes, there were those faithful few who eventually came to believe Mary, but she and her son bore this weight long after he was born.

For example, during this time in Jewish culture, a child would be spoken of as the son or daughter of a father. The Hebrew word for this is ‘Ben. So you might be known as Ben Davide - son of David. Or Ben Yacov - son of Jacob. Or Ben Yoseph - son of Joseph. So back then, you were identified by your bloodline, and so you always referred to someone as the son or daughter of their father.

However, the gospels record something different. Mark’s gospel tells us that, “On the sabbath he began to teach in the synagogue, and many who heard him were astounded. They said, “Where did this man get all this? What is this wisdom that has been given to him? What deeds of power are being done by his hands! Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary.”

So the first audience who would have heard this would have been like … Mary’s son? You would only refer to somebody as the son of a mother if there father was held suspect. In fact, one of the ways that you would slam someone and call into question their legitimacy was to refer to them as the “son of,” and then name the mother.

Now in John’s gospel, Jesus is having a fierce debate with the religious leadership, and at one point in the middle of the debate, Jesus says, “I testify on my own behalf, and the Father who sent me testifies on my behalf.” Then they said to him, “Where is your father?” Which is kind of a weird question if you’re following the debate, unless, of course, they think he’s a mamzer.

And then a few verses later, as the debate gets even more heated, Jesus says to the religious leadership that by trying to kill him, they’re not doing what Abraham would have wanted. And the religious leadership respond with, “We are not illegitimate children, we have one father, God himself.”

Which is quite confusing if you’re following the debate, because you’re left wondering like, where did this come from, unless the religious leaders are trying to pull their Trump card, and call Jesus out as a mamzer. Because once they do that, once they tag him as a mamzer, they don’t have to listen to him anymore. They don’t have to respect him. They can walk away with their head held high.

And so I think the question that’s rattling around here is, “Did God come among us as a mamzer?” And if he did, does that in any way reshape our perspective of the Christmas story.

Well, to answer that, we need to look at this one word in Greek. It’s the word kataluma, and it only occurs three times in the New Testament. Two of those three times are actually the same instance, just recorded by two different authors.

Now when the disciples are preparing for Jesus to celebrate what we have come to refer to as the Last Supper, Jesus gives them very specific instructions. The gospel of Mark records Jesus telling them to say, “The Teacher says, Where is my guest room, or my kataluma, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?”

Luke records Jesus asking them to say, “The Teacher says to you, Where is the guest room, the kataluma, where I am to eat the passover with my disciples?” And so here, kataluma means guest room or spare room. It’s an extra room in a house where relatives could stay when they’re in town.

Now the only other place where kataluma occurs in the New Testament is in Luke chapter 2. Luke says that the emperor called a census, and that everyone was to go to their home town to be registered.

So “Joseph 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.”, There was no place for them in the kataluma. There was no place for them in the guest room. There was no place for them in the spare bedroom.

Now how can this be, when middle-eastern cultures pride themselves on hospitality. How can this be, because this is Joseph’s home town. He’s not asking for a room in a hotel, he’s asking to stay in the guest room in a family member’s home.

Now some commentators will say that Joseph and Mary went to their relative’s home, but their relative’s home was already full, so they were told, “Sorry, we can’t make room for you, you have to stay somewhere else.”

But think about that for a moment, because here’s what that would look like. Say you’re Uncle Bob and Aunt Judy, you’ve travelled to Bethlehem, you’re staying in the family home, and then you hear a knock on the door, and there’s young Joseph and his fiancé Mary, and she’s like very pregnant, like she’s about to give birth, and you stand in the doorway and say, “I already called the spare bedroom. Sorry, but we got here first. Tough.”

Now I live in New Hamburg, but this is my home town. And if it’s storming one night in the middle of winter, I’ve got half a dozen places with relatives where I could just show up, knock on the door, and there is no doubt in my mind that I would be welcomed in.

And yet, our gospel takes place in a middle-eastern culture that prides itself on hospitality. In fact, the ancient code of hospitality meant that they would even be required to make room for total strangers, that they would welcome them into their home, and provide for all of their needs. To turn someone away would be the ultimate in awful social behaviour. Yet why is there no room for this young couple just as she’s about to give birth?

You see, it doesn’t make sense, unless, everyone believes that Mary is carrying a mamzer. I mean, can you imagine how humiliating that would have been, going from relative to relative, and being turned away, being told that you’re not welcome here, that we don’t know who got this girl pregnant Joseph. And then Joseph says, “oh no, no, you don’t understand. She’s pregnant by the holy spirit…” Oh yah, like that clears it up…

And so a mamzer would be ostracized, cast-out, and shoved to the margins, especially in fundamentalist homes who would interpret certain bible passages as saying that you need to keep these people away, because they are a threat to purity, a threat to bloodlines, and a threat to identity.

So there was no room for them in the spare bedroom. Instead someone eventually said to them that they could stay in the stable area out back, which would have been a cave carved into the side of a hill. The manger would have been a block of stone, with a trough cut out of the top. Maybe there was a bit of straw, and most likely it would have been cold. Our modern equivalent would be like an old cot in the garage. So sure you can probably sleep out there, but you’re not coming into the house.

So for the first Christmas, if you’re Mary and Joseph, you’re probably exhausted from travel, humiliated, confused, cold, lonely beyond belief, feeling alienated and rejected, and wondering how in the world did we get into this mess.

And so this baby is born, tagged as a mamzer, growing up in a community where he was scorned and held in contempt. At one point, Jesus even says, “Prophets are not without honor except in their hometown, and among their own kin, and in their own house.” And he could do no deed of power there, except that he laid his hands on a few sick people and cured them. And he was amazed at their unbelief.” In fact, after his first sermon, his home town tries to drive him off a cliff and kill him. Which made me feel better about my first sermon here.

Now throughout his ministry, who does Jesus get accused of hanging out with all the time… ? He hangs out with the marginalized. He hangs out with those who have been pushed to the edge of society. He hangs out with tax collectors and prostitutes, with the sick and the cripple, with the rejected and lonely. He hangs out with essentially everyone who feels like a mamzer. Because everyone who feels like a mamzer, feels like this guy talks my language.

And so to those who have been pushed aside by their own families, Jesus says, you have a god who wants to draw you close. And to those who have been ostracized, and told that you’re not good enough, Jesus says to them, “blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” And to those who have been told that you don’t belong, Jesus says, you belong to me.

Now generally at Christmas time, we look for Jesus in really happy Christmas carols, we look for Jesus in the presents we give, in the faces of children, and in a layer of clean white snow… you see, generally we look for Jesus in all that’s perfect.

But I would suggest, you could also find Jesus in the midst of everything that’s screwed up. That in loneliness, you will find Jesus who will say to you, “I know what you’re going through.” That in rejection, you will find Jesus who will say to you, “I’ve been there.” That when you feel like you’ve been kicked to the margins, you will find Jesus who will say to you, “I know how you feel.”

And so in some ways, Christmas is like this massive cosmic act of solidarity. Yes we look for Jesus in all of the nice, happy, Christmassy stuff, but in the scriptures, over and over we have this insistence, that if you want to know where to find Jesus, you will find him wherever there is pain bandaging up wounds.

And so for those of you who are facing difficult holidays, for those of you who feel like a mamzer, and you know that these next couple of weeks are going to be brutal, may you remember that our hope, peace, joy, and love are found in Jesus, who keeps showing up and rescuing us from our own darkness and despair.

And may you know deep within the core of your being, that you are never alone, that in our cry for God to show up, we’re learning that God has actually been with us all along. In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.