

Open to Wonder: Two Couples and God's Holy Irregulars

Isaiah 54:1-3; Luke 1:5-13, 26-31,34-38; Matthew 1:18-25

To be open to wonder is to be open to surprise. And God is full of surprises in our texts for today. The announcement to Zechariah and Elizabeth, one, then to Mary and Joseph, two. Then to a host of those I call today "God's holy irregulars." We all are irregular in some way, and God loves to use irregulars in God's redemptive work in the world.

I saw a cartoon recently drawn in 1950's Norman Rockwell style. A young daughter is asking her mother: "Mom, what's normal?" Her mom replied, "It's just a setting on the dryer, honey." Americans worship "normal", have an obsession with "normality", whatever "normal" means. The very concept of normal can be harmful, if not deadly.

But today we see that God is fond of using those outside the norms for "normal" in God's holy purposes. What is normal? "It's only a setting on the dryer, honey." So lift up your hearts, ye holy irregulars! You can be part of God's holy plan too. Weirdos are welcome here.

We could start with God's family tree which begins Matthew's birth story. Four women are named as foremothers of Christ. To have women named at all in a genealogical chart at that time was highly irregular. But take a look at the four: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba, not named but described as "Uriah's wife."

Tamar was the wife of Judah's son Er, who died before they could have children. By the strange-to-us law of Leviterate Marriage, Judah's next son Onan was to be given to Tamar as husband to her and provide her a son to keep the family line going. But Onan died—that's a story for another day—and only Judah's third son Shelah was left. Judah, not wanting to risk his third son—did he blame Tamar?—refused to offer Shelah to be husband to Tamar. This meant Tamar was cast out to fend for herself and be exposed to danger and difficulty.

So Tamar concocted a plan. The annual sheep-shearing festival was coming up. She dressed as a harlot and stood by the street with the other harlots. When Judah passed, she caught his eye, he propositioned her, the night was had, and lo and behold Tamar conceived a son! When faced with the news of Tamar's pregnancy, Judah did the right thing: he took responsibility. He praised Tamar as the righteous one, more righteous than he. She'd kept the family line of Judah going.

Now Rahab the prostitute. She ran a brothel in Jericho. Joshua was about to send his soldiers to take over the city, and he sent two spies ahead to assess the

conditions for the attack. The two spies took up lodging in, yes, Rahab's little establishment. When the King of Jericho found out about the spies and where they were lodging, he sent his men to Rahab's place to order her to hand over the spies. Rahab told the King's men that there may have been two men who fit their description, but they had moved on. Meanwhile, she had hidden Joshua's spies up on the roof. When the coast was clear, she let them down from the roof by a rope and they returned safely to Joshua. My guess is that if the two spies had stayed at a more respectable place the innkeeper would have turned them in. Rahab was one of God's holy irregulars.

Now Ruth; you know her story. She was the young foreign girl who taught the Jews what their God was like, *hesed*, full of *steadfast love*. She was a young Moabite woman, and Moabites were despised by the Jews. Hear the words of Deuteronomy:

No Moabite shall be admitted to the house of the Lord.... You shall never promote their welfare or their prosperity as long as you live. (Deut. 23:3-6)

Centuries of hurt and spite lay beneath those words.

Naomi and her husband Elimeleh had fled to Moab from Bethlehem because of a famine. They took with them their two sons who then took Moabite

wives. Then tragedy struck. Elimelech died, then both sons, leaving their two young wives both widows and childless.

When the famine was over, Naomi returned home to Bethlehem, and her young daughter-in-law Ruth, displaying God's *hesed*, God's steadfast love, went with her. In Bethlehem she caught the eye of a wealthy farmer named Boaz, and they courted and married. And lo and behold, they had a son named Obed who had a son named Jesse who had a son named David, King David. So Ruth became the foremother of both David and Jesus.

Now the "wife of Uriah", Bathsheba, whom David coveted even though she was married to Uriah. Terrible sin followed. David sent Uriah to the front lines of war so he would be killed in battle and he could have Bathsheba as his own. But God never lets human sin get in the way, and the repentant David and Bathsheba had a son named Solomon who had a son all the way down the line to Jesus.

See how God uses irregulars, the ones on the margins of life? All four women were slipping through society's cracks, in danger of poverty, ostracism, shame and death.

Matthew uses these four women's stories to set the stage of the highly irregular circumstances of Jesus' birth stories.

Now let's move to our text from Isaiah 54. The lectionary text for this Joy Sunday.

Sing, O barren one who did not bear,

burst into song and shout,

you who have not been in labor!

For the children of the desolate woman

will be more than the children of

her that is married, says the Lord.

“Fear not”, God said, one of God’s most needed and frequent refrains to us, “for you will not be ashamed.” Sometimes the irregular part of us can feel deep shame, and God comes to release us from the shame that kills our spiritual lives.

Christmas is a hard time for those not in the “normal” American family category. No romance going. Not married, male or female. No children or grandchildren around the tree. Even that word “barren” in the text can bring a sense of shame. But God is announcing that those single, unmarried and childless will help build the people of God. Think of all the children who have been taught and nurtured by women and men with no children of their own, some who have given their lives in pursuit of the thriving of all God’s children. I could make a long list. Think of those who choose to be single and whose lives are full and purposeful.

I saw a delightful meme about the stars and main characters of the old Andy Griffith Show. Andy, Barney Fife, Aunt Bee, Floyd the barber, Gomer Pyle, Ellie and Thelma Lou—they were all single! The only married one was Otis the town drunk!

In Isaiah 54 God was not only talking about individuals but about the nation as a whole:

Enlarge the site of your tent
 let the curtains of your habitations
 be stretched out. Lengthen the
 cords and strengthen the stakes!

In other words, start building nurseries! I preached a sermon on this text here a number of years back. Lengthen the Cords, Strengthen the Stakes! *Prepare to grow!*

Last Sunday we had seven young children in the nursery. And many Sundays we have a least seven elementary children with us. What joy they are to us! If my sermon was a prophecy come true, it was probably the first time!

Now we need new hands and laps and teachers to raise them in the faith and way of Jesus. Anyone want to join this holy work?

Now to other holy surprises in the birth narratives in Luke and Matthew. First, there was Elizabeth and Zechariah. Zechariah was a countryside priest serving God in humble circumstances. He and his wife Elizabeth were childless and up in years and had been praying unsuccessfully many years for a child.

The miracle happened when it was Zechariah's most proud day as a priest, the day when he would go to the temple in Jerusalem and offer a sacrifice on behalf of the Hebrew people. While he was alone at the altar, the angel Gabriel appeared and told him that their long prayers for a child had been answered. Elizabeth would bear a son, and they were to name him John. Zechariah was incredulous and argued with the angel: "I am old, and Elizabeth, she's up in years too." The angel said, "Well I am Gabriel, and it shall be whether you believe it or not!"

The text says that Gabriel told him that because of his disbelief he would become mute until the day of John's birth. Well, that's Luke's take on the story. But it may have happened like this: When Zechariah returned home to Elizabeth and told her the crazy news from the angel and he did not believe a word of it, she told him to keep his unbelieving mouth shut until her baby was born! She was open to wonder, and that was enough!

Luke now moves the story to a young teenager, around 14, who was betrothed to a man irregularly older than she, who was named Joseph. The angel Gabriel appeared to her and issued the astounding call to bear the holy child of God. “How can this be?”, the young Mary asked, “for I have no husband.” Gabriel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High shall overshadow you. The child will be called holy, the son of God.”

If you say yes, Mary, if you say yes. The poet W.H. Auden put these words in Gabriel’s mouth:

...child, it lies

Within your power of choosing to

Conceive the child who chooses you.

The poet Denise Levertov writes:

...we are told of meek obedience. No one mentions courage.

And she writes about the *courage of Mary’s consent*. Every act of faith requires an element of courage.

And Mary said to the angel: “I am a servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word.”

Now to Matthew's gospel and to worried, confounded Joseph. Most Christmas cantatas give him short shrift. He a simple carpenter was much older than she.

But now Joseph discovered that she was with child, and he knew he was not the father. What was he to think? In those days betrothal was as binding a covenant as marriage. For a woman to be unfaithful sexually during that time was punishable by death, or by banishment from the marriage with all the shame and social insecurity that went with it.

Joseph being a "just" man, "*tzaddik*"—meaning justice mixed with mercy—decided to divorce her quietly, without public shaming. Was it just justice and mercy? Could he also have been smitten by her?

But then God intervened in a dream through the words of an angel. "Do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife", the angel said, "for the child to be born is of the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son and his name will be Jesus"—which means "God comes to save."

When Joseph awoke from the dream, he obeyed the dream and took Mary to be his wife, to love, honor cherish and protect—as he would also love, cherish and protect the child within her. It might be said that he took a startlingly non-

patriarchal role in this decision. And Jesus may have learned his own freedom from patriarchy from his earthly father, Joseph.

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What about us today? Can you believe that God can love and use irregular you? Something may have happened and we feel we are unusable by God.

We may put our good regular face on when we come to church. Put our regular foot forward. Perhaps there's an irregular part of us, the *we* we hide a lot of the time—even to ourselves. But the wonder of this season is, if you look carefully at the stories, is that God does God's holy work through irregulars! And that irregular, non-typical, non-normal part of us may be especially useful to God. Maybe this part of us is more vulnerable and ready for God.

I wonder, I wonder as I wander, what God has up her sleeve for us next!