

More Than We Bargained For
Matthew 1:18-25; Romans 1:1-7

Christian author, Shane Claiborne wrote in a recent article: “So, what seems to happen to those saints and prophets - who were dangerous. We bronze them, we drain them of their passion and life, and trap them in stained-glass windows and icons, confining them safely in memories of the past. St. Francis becomes a birdbath, Malcolm X is put on a stamp, and Martin Luther King gets a holiday” ...

Something similar happens with Jesus, doesn't it? Here we are, once again, celebrating Christ's coming into our world...Who among us are not so caught up in a flurry of activities and responsibilities leading up to Christmas, while leaving little time to reflect on how God intends Jesus coming, to impact our hearts, our daily living, our world?

Biblical scholar J.B. Phillips, some fifty years ago, wrote in an article that “we stand in danger of losing sight of the ‘quiet but explosive significance’ of Christ's birth, the good news that ‘we live on a visited planet’... that God has chosen to fully enter into human life...that Christ's coming is an expression of God's deepest love for all humanity and for all creation”.

In Hosea, chapter 11, God is in the midst of grappling with Israel as he laments and grieves over their sinfulness. Israel was consumed and lost by injustice, oppression, violence, and militarism. And God laments, “Swords will flash in their cities...my people are determined to turn from me”...Uh oh Israel!

But then Hosea hears God remembering, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son. But the more I called Israel, the further they went from me . . . I led them with cords of human kindness, with ties of love; I lifted the yoke from their neck and bent down to feed them” (Hosea 11:1-2, 4)...Those recollections, apparently, prompt God to recognize that he simply could not give up on the people. Hosea hears God saying, “My heart is changed within me. All my compassion is aroused. I will not carry out my

fierce anger, nor will I turn and devastate Ephraim (Israel). For I am God and not man - the Holy One among you. I will not come in wrath" (11:8-9).

You see, it's love - it's not anger - it is gracious, generous, expansive, redemptive, boundless, inclusive love that motivates God to take the unheard of step to enter fully into human life. And yet still today, the church - the body of Christ - continues to spend so much energy bickering over who's in and who's out. We are prone to place limits, on God's limitless love, and are uncomfortable with a love that seems far too gracious, far too accepting, far too bold in its embrace of those on the fringes of society.

Not surprisingly then, the people in the early Christmas story, also found the notion of God acting with boundless love almost unimaginable! In Luke, the angel Gabriel appears to a baffled and perplexed Mary, telling her that she has a key role to play in God's unfolding story. "You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:31-320). That's pretty hard to believe.

Matthew's account assumes that Joseph heard of Mary's unanticipated pregnancy, and chose to divorce her as quietly as possible. In those days Jewish marriage involved two stages - an initial formal consent of marriage that Joseph and Mary had already made, followed, often a year later, by the two beginning to live together. Joseph, described by Matthew as "righteous", seeks to be discreet in ending the marriage. But in a dream, an angel appears to Joseph, assuring him that Mary has been faithful. "Do not be afraid to take Mary home as your wife, because what is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matthew 1:20)...Let me see, Mary's pregnant...yet has been faithful to me? Now that's pretty hard to believe!!

Luke portrays Mary embracing this holy responsibility of mothering Jesus, telling the angel, "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said" (Luke 1:38). And in

Matthew's Gospel Joseph accepts the divine task as well, with the Gospel writer telling us that "when Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord commanded him and took Mary home as his wife" (Matthew 1:24). The couple stake their lives, their honor, their reputation, their futures - on the divine promise that the impending birth of this child, Jesus, signals that God is doing something so new, that Jesus will indeed be identified as Immanuel, God-with-us...

Like Mary and Joseph, we too are called to stake our lives on the promise that God is ushering in a new reality, that God is creating a world of justice and peace, of wholeness and new life, of grace and peace...And along the way, we may well find ourselves getting far more than we bargained for, because you and I are asked to become God's co-workers – we are asked to become instruments of Christ's peace; messengers of God's hope; embodiments of God's grace; proclaimers of Christ's joy; vessels of God's light.

It's an incredibly high calling, isn't it? One commentary I read noted that for the church to be co-workers of God, to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, we must become what is called "extremists for grace".

Martin Luther King's in a letter he wrote from a Birmingham Jail, where he responded to charges from fellow clergy that, in his determination to work for racial and social justice, he had become an *extremist*! Dr. King wrote this from his jail cell:

I must admit that I was initially disappointed in being so categorized. But as I continued to think about the matter I gradually gained a bit of satisfaction from being considered an extremist. Was not Jesus an extremist in love - "Love your enemies, bless them that curse you, pray for them that despitefully use you." Was not Amos an extremist for justice - "let justice roll down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream." Was not Paul an extremist for the gospel of Jesus Christ - "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Was not Martin

Luther an extremist - "Here I stand; I can do no other, so help me God." . . . So the question is not whether we will be extremist but what kind of extremist we will be. Will we be extremists for hate or will we be extremists for love? Will we be extremists for the preservation of injustice - or will we be extremists for the cause of justice?

We serve a God who was - and is - an extremist for love, one who lavishes grace beyond measure upon us, one who - in the words of that much-loved verse - "God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son . . . For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:16-17). And what is the nature of that salvation? It's a new quality of living, here and now, a new promise of peace and shalom, a new embodiment of love that is able to turn the world upside down.

The Christmas message of incarnation, of God taking human flesh among us, is the good news that God's extreme love assures us that war and hatred, fear and division, hostility and grief - shall not have the final word in life. The apostle Paul begins his letter to the church in Rome - a small group of Christians he has not yet met - reminding them of the power of the gospel to transform life. In Romans 1:7 Paul writes, "Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ". Here Paul combines the usual Greek greeting - *charis*, meaning grace - with a traditional Hebrew greeting - *shalom*, meaning peace. It is a powerful reminder that in Christ old barriers of hostility and division come tumbling down; that the gospel of Jesus Christ is for all people; that forgiveness and reconciliation, healing and peace, shalom and new life, are very real possibilities.

It's far more than we bargained for - this love that knows no limits, this love that will not let us go, this love that loves to the extreme. It is never enough to bronze Jesus or to place him in stained-glass; much more, the gift of Jesus comes alive in us and among us as we allow his Spirit to transform us - heart, mind, and soul. Our values and life

perspective, our being, thinking, and doing - all may be transformed by Immanuel, God-with-us. Along the way, we discover that there is indeed no power at all except the power of his love. Thanks be to God! Amen.