



Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA

Rev. Scott E. Schul

Christmas Eve: December 24, 2018

Sermon Title: "The Scandal of Jesus"

Gospel Text: Luke 2:1-20

In the warm glow of candlelight, in the shadow of a humble manger, and with all of this talk about a newborn baby, I can't help but think back to the time, over 21 years ago, when I first became a father. After more miscarriages and tears than we care to remember, my wife and I had decided to adopt. You can imagine our excitement when the adoption agency called and shared the news that we had been selected by a teenage girl on the other side of the country to be the parents of the baby girl she would soon deliver. Our hearts were overflowing with hope.

And yet I must admit to the fears I also felt. After all, we had received such phone calls before, and all they ultimately produced were false alarms, changed minds, and more tears. We feared our hearts would break again. We also had the normal fears all new parents possess. Can we do this? Are we ready? Do we know what we've gotten ourselves into?

Joseph received similar news over two millennia ago. Tradition holds that he was quite a bit older than Mary, and probably was a widower with children of his own. I imagine that excitement is not exactly the first emotion *he* experienced when his teenage bride-to-be shared the news with him that she was expecting a child, because they both knew that he – Joseph – had not fathered that child. At this point in his life, he had not bargained on becoming an adoptive father. At this point in his life, a baby of questionable origins was a scandal that Joseph did not need or want.

"Scandal" is not a word we're used to associating with Jesus at Christmas time. But that's exactly what his appearance threatened to cause for Joseph. Joseph had options though. Under the law, he would have been within his rights to publicly shame Mary for violating the marriage agreement they had entered into. The fault would be all hers, and it was possible – perhaps even likely – that she would have paid for that fault with her life. I suspect, however, that Joseph rightly calculated that pursuing that option would only heap shame upon shame. Better to end this quietly and discreetly by sending Mary away. Banish her and that scandalous baby and get on with life.

Joseph is not the only one who is scandalized by Jesus. Aren't we as well? Isn't there a piece of us that is just a little embarrassed that in this age of scientific discovery and technological advancement, the Church continues to cling to an ancient story about an illegitimate child who bridges heaven and earth, turns death into life, and offers forgiveness and mercy? Surely there are many in our world today who embrace the options that were available to Joseph. "Let's expose this story, destroy it, and publicly shame any who insist on holding

onto it! At the very least, let's put this story to rest and quietly send it away so that we end the embarrassment and cease the scandal that is Jesus." What will *you* do with Jesus?

For that matter, what would Joseph do? I can only imagine the conversations he and Mary must have had, as Joseph sorted through his options and Mary persisted in insisting that *God* was in, with, and through all of this. Not a single spoken word of Joseph's is included in the New Testament. We don't have a clue what he *said*. But the Bible leaves no doubt about what Joseph *did*. In a dream, an angel appeared to Joseph and said, "Do not be afraid." The angel confirmed that Mary would give birth to the Son of God, in fulfillment of ancient promises. And so when Joseph awoke, he put his fears aside, he gave no further thought or concern to worldly opinions, and became the loving husband of Mary, and the adoptive father, caretaker, and protector of Jesus.

Tonight, are you afraid? Are you afraid of risking your heart on Jesus? If you are, take a chance, at least for one night. *Dare to trust Jesus* and see how your life and outlook might change. Are you afraid of what your friends might say if you commit yourself to his way of peace, mercy, and love? If that's how you make your life choices, then you have a bigger problem than Jesus. Don't be enslaved to the fashions or opinions of this day. *Dare to trust Jesus*. Or are you afraid that following Jesus means you must reject common sense, rational thought, and the scientific method? God blessed you with brains. Being a Christian doesn't mean that you have to discard wisdom, common sense, or modern science. But it *does* invite you to consider the possibility that there are other ways of knowing things – ways beyond our understanding. Truth is revealed through more than just test tubes and equations. Somehow, some way, perhaps tonight a new awareness of the truth of that scandalous Jesus is being rekindled in your heart. Do you sense it? *Do not be afraid*.

I still remember that first night as a new father. We were thousands of miles away from home, in a hotel room, just the three of us: my wife, my new daughter, and me. I can't truthfully say that all of my fears about being a new dad had gone away, but they had at least receded into the background as I marveled at this precious new life now entrusted to us. She was only two weeks old at the time, with an angelic face and a shock of red hair that stuck straight up. Sleep was elusive that night, not because we were anxious or worried, but because we just wanted to stare at this little miracle all night long.

When we made our way back home a week later, we were blessed by the company of trusted family and friends who wisely knew when to pitch in and help, and when to give us some space and quiet time to enjoy the miracle of this new child. We had a warm, clean home to give our little girl the very best start on life, and the power to decide who had access to *her* and to *our time and attention*.

That of course was not the case with Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. The scandal continued as the birth took place in what scholars believe was a cave, and not just any cave, but a cave that was normally used to house and feed animals. One can only imagine the filth that surrounded the newborn king. If that wasn't bad enough, the quiet peace of a mother's first hours and days with a newborn baby were interrupted by the appearance of a band of strangers from a nearby field – not just any strangers but the lowest of the low – shepherds who were probably dirtier and

smelled worse than the cave itself. It seems that same angel who had counseled Joseph to put his fears aside and embrace Jesus had given the shepherds a similar message. And so how could Mary and Joseph turn them away after they shared that story?

The scandal of Jesus's friends would continue throughout his adult life, as he insisted on associating with tax collectors, prostitutes, the impoverished and diseased, and all manner of outcasts. Even today Jesus continues to scandalize us with the people he draws near to us and to his Church. He throws open the doors to people like us: sinners, doubters, and misfits who hear his call. And in response to our anxieties and concerns about the scandalous company he keeps, he smiles and repeats the angel's words: "Do not be afraid."

That first Christmas, how could Mary and Joseph ever imagine the many ways this baby would change their lives? For that matter, how can any parent foresee the many changes a new baby will bring? But Jesus changed more than his family. He changed more than his world. He changed all of eternity. Tonight he comes to *you*, and he invites *you* to be changed as well. What a scandal he is! But what a blessing he holds. Are you willing to trust Jesus? *Do not be afraid.* Merry Christmas. Amen.