

The MennoNet

Winter 2019

Patient and Ever Present

(Emily Nyce gave this sermon Jan. 4 in Atlanta at the National Festival of Young Preachers)

A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew, chapter 1, verses 18-25:

Now, the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother, Mary, had been engaged to Joseph, but before they had lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.



In a scene from the Christmas pageant at First Mennonite, Mary (Maggie Sobel) receives a visit from an angel (Olivia Harrison), with Ben Reinford narrating.

Her husband, Joseph, being a righteous man and therefore unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid. Take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” All of this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: “Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God-is-with-us.” When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

More complicated theological texts have been written, but not many. However, I am not here to discuss nor debate the more forward claims the writer of Matthew has left us pondering for so long: those age-old questions of virgin conception and birth, complicated marital systems, the details of Spirit incarnate in flesh, what sins Jesus saves one from and how, and the nature of dreams, angels, miracles. Those are such important theological lenses for looking at this text, and yet, this Advent season, none of them grabbed my attention. Instead, my first reaction upon welcoming the season of Advent was one of perplexed anger. This text and western Advent made me a bit mad.

But, then, within that anger, an image filled my imagination and helped me listen to the fullness of this text. This image guides us to discover the great interpretive hope hidden here in Matthew for how to embody the gospel of God with us. Now, one caveat, though: *The following scenario is completely fictitious.* Historically, it did not happen this way, but it also did not *not* happen this way.

So, imagine with me a room. The walls are made of a pale, tan limestone. Hand chiseled and ancient- the very bones of the Earth around you. In the middle of the room sits an intricate and extensive wooden table. It’s probably made from the imported cedar trees of Lebanon. It is worn, but it is well taken care of. Many hands have decided many religious things sitting here. Sometimes praying, sometimes shouting. And hands come here again: men’s hands. These men are standing at the moment, and they’re all looking down at the many papers along the table outlining the beginnings of the liturgical calendar. They decide the dates of Christmas, of Easter, Pentecost, Epiphany and the in-between of Ordinary time. Leading up to Easter is 40 days of Lent, they decide. This commemorates Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days, which in another layer commemorates the Exodus of the Hebrew people from Egypt — 40 years in the desert. Then, they get to the season before Christmas. “Advent,” they call it. How long should the waiting be for Jesus? They look to each other. “Eh, maybe a little more than three weeks? Four Sundays?” Yes. Laughter fills the room, but not theirs. No one at that table hears anything, and they just continue on, deciding, deciding.

Where did that laughter come from, then? That perplexed, angered laughter.

The women. You see, seated on the edge of that important room are the women of Jesus’ lineage: Tamar, Rahab, Ruth and Bathsheba. Look, there’s Sarah, Abraham’s wife; she is, of course, laughing the loudest, with a good, “Ha!” And then there’s Mary, Jesus’ mother. She actually stands in the corner, her arms crossed, head shaking, taking deep and charged breaths. She says to the other women: “They think they will wait on Jesus’ birth for four little weeks?! They have obviously never even considered pregnancy! Try nine months, which is, 40 weeks!! Yes, that’s right, 40! That magical, sacred number ‘40.’ ” The other women nod and “hmm” in agreement. . .

Oh, this year, I couldn't help but see Mary, Sarah, Tamar, Ruth and others on the side there, unseen and unheard in the planning of the Western liturgical calendar, offering a wisdom many have yet to understand. I couldn't help but read these old words from Matthew and realize that he is only writing about Joseph's perspective! Yes, Luke has Mary. But Matthew does not. What is more interesting to me this year is not just what *is* written in Matthew's account (because it is fascinating and good), but what *is not* written. What holes are left? What voices are lost? How has silencing Mary lost us a fundamental thread in this theologically woven story? I have since come to believe that Matthew actually needs Mary's experience for her sake, his and ours. The theology and interpretive method of Matthew is actually ripe and ready for Mary — "pregnant," you could even say.

Matthew, as you know, is a very Jewish book, written for the sake of claiming the Jewish identity for Jesus followers in its time. In verses 18-25 (and before and after), Matthew explains how Jesus' origin and not just his birth fulfills and continues all of the Israelites' stories that have come before him. The writer of Matthew's gospel was a master weaver. It is how Matthew interprets the gospel in the world: Story after story, thread through thread, character referencing another character and another. **To know the gospel, just keep weaving.** Reinterpret and reimagine because God's story is here, again. Emmanuel, he says: God-is-always-with-us.

Here — this is only a small sum of the whole, but just watch Matthew weave: Joseph receives a visit from an angel declaring a divine conception where he thought there could not possibly be one. He's like Father Abraham. Also, Joseph is, repeatedly, mentioned as Son of David. Maybe Solomon, for he is very wise.

In verse 19, Joseph knows to interpret the Law through compassion (eventually, a trademark of Jesus, who is also referenced as the Son of David). More threads are woven as God the Spirit is introduced. This is an origin story. The Greek word usually just translated as "birth" is actually "genesis" or "origin."

There is chaos and tension, and God's Spirit creates order and initiates perpetuating, life-giving forces. It is the Creation story again. But then, God's Spirit is also the Spirit of the Old Testament: Sophia, Wisdom.

Then, Jesus' three names are yet another set of stiches. Matthew calls Jesus the Messiah, or Christ. He is the long-awaited king. And, Jesus is also named "Jesus" here, which in Hebrew is a form of Joshua. Joshua was the great leader of the Israelites after the Exodus, saving the people from their sins (although, Jesus does this quite differently, quite nonviolently). But finally, for the entirety of the book, Matthew weaves Jesus into the loom like a second Moses. Jesus fulfills the Law and the prophets through a radical set of ethics.

Which is why Matthew cites Isaiah. This particular passage from Isaiah, "the virgin giving birth," isn't quoted anywhere else in the New Testament. This is why I love Matthew's gospel quilt. He pulls in another story, another color and texture, and this weaving mechanism is our interpretive permission to keep weaving forward, too. He wants his readers to see the full story. In verse 22, Matthew says, "All this took place." All of this! Matthew, writing about Jesus in the late first century, tells his confused, angered, hurt, diverse, hope-filled community: See all of the connections because what we lift out can lift us up. God-is-always-with-us.

Therefore, I stand with him today and I say: To know the gospel, just keep weaving. Mary belongs, and she always did (hence, why God uses her)! God's good news includes all of the stories, all of the voices. Matthew just didn't see Mary, but the Spirit of interpretation calls us to reimagine and remember her today. For instance, we can weave a stronger, more beautiful thread representing Mary faithfully into Matthew's account because the Hebrew name for Mary is Miriam- Miriam, the sister who saves baby Moses. She is not his biological mother, but she participates vitally in mothering the good news. Mary/Miriam. Jesus/Moses.

Weaving more, we remember that the story of the Exodus is one of the top, if not the most important, stories of God-with-us. And yet, Exodus is not referenced in this part of Matthew's origin story. But it could be! Just look, listen and work with the threads, because between the 40 years and the 40 days, sits Mary, at 40 weeks. These are connected.

Maybe Mary is more like the second Moses, and Jesus the third. There would not be one without the other. This gospel says that the kin-dom of God is like pregnancy waiting for birth, which is like Exodus waiting for the promised land. This kind of participation in the kin-dom is one of the most basic and liberating experiences for the world — literally and figuratively. It's *all of this*. We need Mary in Matthew. To know the gospel, just keep weaving. Matthew did not say everything there is to say about Jesus' origin story. The loom is open.

Advent should commemorate 40, too (like many of our Eastern brothers and sisters, actually). And so, what does this weaving Advent text teach us about embodying the kin-dom of God-always-with-us?

I think we need to come back to that room with Mary in the corner shaking her head. Mary has a gospel message, and I hear Mary say to me and to you: "If you want to birth the kin-dom of God in any form, be like me. If you want know God incarnate, remember 40. Forty.

"Forty always means a long time. There are no shortcuts in the kin-dom. We must weave it all, and wait. God's freedom doesn't break through and reign without pregnancy waiting for birth like Exodus on its way to the Promised Land.

"The hope and growth of the kin-dom requires change, discomfort, strength, sacrifice, perseverance, powerlessness and power, purging anxiety and choosing compassion, constantly trusting to let it all grow — and most importantly, the kin-dom of God requires time. It's 40.

"Time. Mustard seeds and yeast, wilderness and womb — they all have this in common. Time is required. And yet nothing is without the presence of God-always-with-us. You can be sure of that promise."

Mary then pauses, smiles softly, and says back to the women, "This is gospel. This is Jesus' origin story."

So, my friends here with me today, I say, Advent is not over. Reimagine Mary. Remember 40, for the Kin-dom of Heaven on Earth is patient and ever-present.

Amen.



**FMC held a baby “sprinkle” on Jan. 27 for Greg, Lauren and Rosalind Lamb
And their new baby Colette, born March 7.**



**Pastor Ryan leads a child dedication, also on Jan. 27, for Zoe (left) and
Evelyn Ford, with their parents, Hannah and Pierce.**

Being Aged Grandparents in the Modern Era

By Murray Ellison (with memory help from Hainah Ellison)

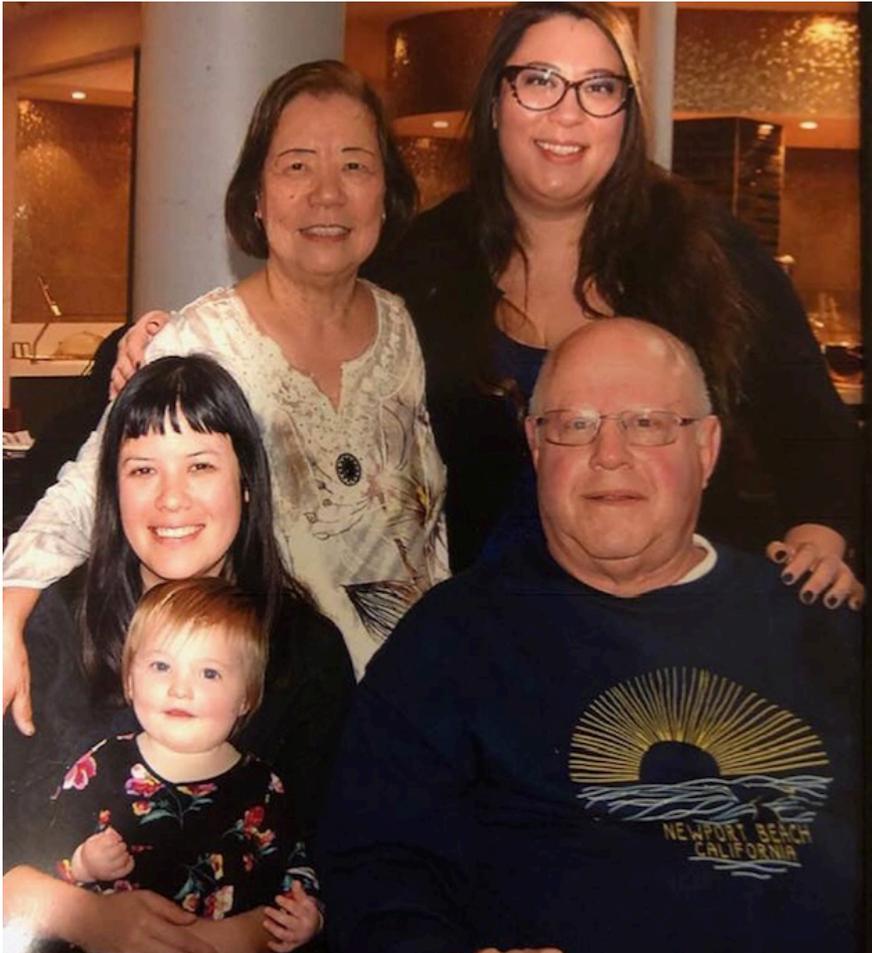
On February 25th, our first and only granddaughter, Nico Clara Greenburg, will be 1 year old. This would not be a big deal for most couples, but for Hainah and me, who have been married for almost 40 years and have three daughters in their 30s, this will be a profound event. In fact, we had almost given up on the idea of having grandchildren as we approached or surpassed our 70s. For years, I resisted looking at or commenting on Facebook pictures of same-age friends of mine playing with their newborn grandchildren, or even the children of their grandchildren. Disgusting, I thought, to see mature and intelligent people crawling on the floor, making such a big deal, acting more like children than the tiny children they were adoring.

But all of that changed about a two years ago when our middle daughter, Anna Clara Ellison, who lives in Los Angeles, told us that she and her partner, Eric Greenberg, were expecting a baby. Of course, we were overjoyed to receive the news that our daughter was about 6 weeks pregnant. Like most parents, we wished that our grandchild would be happy and healthy, would one day get married, and that we would get a chance to enjoy being grandparents.

In December 2017, when Anna was about seven months pregnant, she told us that that she and Eric would soon be visiting us in Richmond, and that we were invited to attend the ultrasound that they had already scheduled in town. By that time, the couple already knew that the baby would be a girl and doctors had told them that their baby looked healthy and active in the womb. This was confirmed when we first saw Nico moving around in the ultrasound. All of our dreams and hopes for our daughter had been fulfilled then, right? But wait, how about the marriage part? Isn't that typically part of the deal?

When we asked Anna about that detail, she simply replied, "What, get married while I am pregnant? I don't want to do that. Maybe, after the baby comes." We also got the idea that she didn't want to discuss this idea with us in any further detail. I felt that she was subtly conveying to us that she believed that this was a matter that was promoted by parents from former generations, but that it was not as valued by mothers and parents of the modern age. As Hainah and I had been friends with many married parents of our generation who had gotten divorced, we did not try to argue with her point. We conceded that they appeared to be committed to each other and both equally involved in caring for their child. So, privately, we conceded that the well-being of our soon-to-arrive granddaughter was more important than our expectations and conventions. So, we let the marriage issue drop until a later date, and looked forward to our granddaughter's birth.

In January 2018, we received an invitation from the couple to attend a baby shower that would be held in early February in their Los Angeles home. This event was bring arranged by Eric's mother, Linda, her sisters, and my oldest daughter Tara, who recently moved to L.A. It was also assisted by a group of new and expecting parents who were close friends of Anna and Eric. As Hainah was in Taiwan visiting with her family at that time, I attended the shower alone, helped out during the festivities, and got to interact with this large support network. I was particularly impressed by how hard everyone worked to make the shower such a joyous event.



Murray and Hainah Ellison with daughters Tara and Anna, and granddaughter, Nico, in Los Angeles.

We received many updates about the impending birth for the next few months but didn't get the notice that Anna went into labor until about February 24th, while we were on a Caribbean cruise with our church small group members— the Smeltzers and the Jessups. As internet on cruises is unsteady or unavailable, we got intermittent messages that Anna's labor was extremely long. But almost 24 hours after it started, she delivered a healthy baby girl, Nico. We were even fortunate to show our friends some pictures of our newborn granddaughter.

In this new age of bi-coastal grand parenting, Hainah and I could not arrange to fly to Los Angeles to see Nico until March, when she was about 3 weeks old. As a young infant cannot do much, we spent much of the time helping to feed her, changing her diaper and rocking her, so her parents, who had been up half the night trying to comfort Nico, could get some sleep. During this time, we were also invited to stay with Eric's mom Linda, in her Newport Beach house, near L.A. We also got to spend more time with the other grandmother's sisters, husband and other relatives. Although they were not officially relatives yet, I felt that there was a strong family tie already developing between us. During our time with them, everyone went out of their way to hold Nico and support her parents. As we left California, we felt that our daughter and granddaughter were well supported by an extended family and friends.

The next time we got to see Anna, Eric and Nico was in Florida before Christmas. They and Tara (on separate trips) had flown to Florida to celebrate the graduate school graduation of our youngest daughter, Leah, and celebrate Christmas together in Leah's house. This was also the first time that I observed Nico crawling around, attempting to stand, and interacting with people, like us, who were interested in reading, singing and playing with her. Everyone, including Leah's boyfriend, Trevor, got to interact with Nico as she was enjoying splashing in a swimming pool for the first time.

We flew out to California about a week later, where we met some of Hainah's nieces and relatives who either lived in or were visiting L.A., spent time enjoying meals and outings with Anna and Eric, and more time staying with Linda and some of her other relatives at her beach house. At one point, a bunch of adults from both sides of Nico's family were crawling around and making baby sounds and acting like babbling infants. Naturally, I would understand if you can't imagine why grown adults would act so silly. Of course, I posted many pictures of our time with our granddaughter on Facebook.

Winter Sunday School Class: A Crazy Holy Grace

As the new year began, we held a six-session study based on the book *A Crazy, Holy Grace: The Healing Power of Pain and Memory* by Frederick Buechner, a Presbyterian minister and prolific writer of reflective autobiography, sermons, fiction and nonfiction. A common message in many of his writings is to "pay attention — to your life, to the people with whom you are closest, to the things that happen to you."* Through engaging spiritual, theological and personal contemplation, the class grappled with the nature of pain, grief, healing and grace. The study is designed to reveal how God's grace and healing is always available even when he seems silent. We used Buechner's personal story, as well as our own stories, with scriptural and contemporary overlay to explore how we hear God speaking through our pain and the healing power of memory.

**See Buechner's website for his weekly blog, daily quotes and other resources: <http://www.frederickbuechner.com/listening-to-your-life/> —Barbara Bowman*

God Sight

By Brenda Ham

The next time you step out of your door
Are you in his scope.
He — there to take the life of those he does not know
Or perhaps he does.
Did he come there before
To know where the most vulnerable would be,
Those there naming a child in a house of peace.

But he looked so normal some said
As he chose his weapons to do the evil deed.
How could we not know
When the hate-filled words were there for all to see
On this gab site.
Where is the God sight
In which we are all seeped.



FMC members Tina Eshleman (from left), Ellen Basinger, Paul Joireman and Ken Wermuth serve a meal to participants of the Circles RVA program at Grace and Holy Trinity Episcopal Church. The program provides mentors and resources for people to help them move out of poverty.

When I Die

By J. Wayne Beachy

The sun will still shine

The rain will still fall.

There will be days of sadness

There will be days of laughter

There will still be war

There will still be love

There will be terrible music

There will be wonderful music

(When I Die, continued)

People will die

People will live

Some will believe I've gone to Heaven

Some will believe I've gone to Hell

Art will be worse

Art will be better

People will still cry

People will still laugh

Thoughts will be lost

Thoughts will be saved

People will starve

People will glutton

Some will be poor

Some will be rich

God goes on forever

My ashes will flow down the mountain

To the river

My soul goes on

Remembering Constance Longacher

A service of celebration will be held at Park View Mennonite Church, 1600 College Ave., Harrisonburg, on March 23 at 2:30 p.m. A longtime member of FMC before moving to Harrisonburg in 2013, Constance served as an elder multiple times, taught Sunday school and became a mentor and role model for generations of younger women. Memorial contributions may be made to the Brenneman-Longacher Math Scholarship Fund at Eastern Mennonite University or to Mennonite Central Committee. *(Excerpted from her obituary in the Daily News-Record.)*



The MennoNet is the newsletter of First Mennonite Church of Richmond, 601 E. Parham Road. Our phone number is 804-264-3200. Website: firstmennonitechurch.org. Email Pastor Ryan Ahlgrim at pastor@firstmennonitechurch.org; secretary secretary@firstmennonitechurch.org. Tina Eshleman (teshleman@comcast.net) and Murray Ellison (bluemur@verizon.net) are the *MennoNet* Editors.

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