

Trinity United Methodist Church

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“Under Wraps: God is Dangerous”

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Scripture: Matthew 2:1-3

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.” When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

Sermon

Would you pray with me? Oh Lord, open our ears and our hearts. Let us hear what we need to hear and show us what we need to do to become more faithful disciples of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. In His name we pray, amen.

It is great to worship with all y’all this morning!

Have you ever had the experience where mama, or maybe your spouse, has baked a fresh batch of chocolate chip cookies, or (insert your favorite dessert here), and tells you not to eat any, though, “because they’re for the church function later on.” And there’s got to be at least, like, three dozen in there, right? So surely she won’t notice if one or two or half a dozen go missing. And just as you get one in your mouth, she walks in and...(gasp). Right?

Sometimes it’s worse than that. There’s a story from my childhood. I was young enough that I don’t remember, but evidently one time when I was a young kid, mom left me to color at the coffee table in the living room while she went in the kitchen to start fixing dinner. Dad walked in from work and found me turned away from the coffee table to the couch, coloring the skirt on the couch just a lovely shade of green. And to this day he says that I’m lucky that *he* found me instead of Mom, especially based on the look on my face.

Sometimes *you’re* the person that walks in, especially if you’re a parent, and the person who you walk in on starts scrambling and acting like nothing’s wrong and everything’s normal, right? Sure...

Well, it's the same type of thing whenever God shows up in the Bible. Every time God shows up or an angel or a messenger shows up, every single time, what's the first thing they have to tell whoever they're showing up to? "Do not be afraid." What are they afraid of? It's God showing up, right? We'd like to think if God literally showed up here today, we'd be all happy and joyful. "What's up, God? How's it going?" But the response of fear comes not so much from them doing wrong, but that God is so holy, and that God in all of His holiness strikes that kind of fear. Because no matter what we're doing whenever God shows up, we fall short of His holiness. All of us, the Bible tells us. And, in fact, falling short is one of my favorite definitions of sin. Because some of us say, "I don't do the 'big' sins, so my sin isn't all that bad." But sin is sin, because even in ways small as well as large, we fall short of the glory of God and His holiness.

Well, friends, the Christmas story is the ultimate story of God showing up and catching us perhaps unaware. Today we read the beginning of the story of the three wise men, or the magi, who came from "afar" – remember that? That's a good one. They came in search of the king, so they went to Jerusalem. Jesus was born in Bethlehem, but they went to Jerusalem. It's like when foreign dignitaries come and visit our country, they go to D.C. Or even if they were to come to Virginia, they'd go to Richmond. They wouldn't think to come to a place like little old Smithfield.

And so they go to Jerusalem because they're asking, saying, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose in the East and have come to worship him." But there's one problem with that. They're asking the guy who already thought that he was the king of the Jews, because he gave himself that title. King Herod. He thought that he might personally fulfill the prophecies of the Messiah. So when King Herod heard this, we read that he was disturbed, and all of Jerusalem with him.

Now, of course, Herod was disturbed because he'd just found out that this new threat to his political power is evidently on the rise. But we also read that all of Jerusalem was disturbed with him. Why would that be? Maybe it's because if the king of the Jews, the true king of the Jews, had been born, then that meant that the prophecies were fulfilled just when they were giving up on them. And if the prophecies were being fulfilled, then that means God is at work and God is on the move, and if God is on the move, then God might actually show up. And if God might show up, well, good golly, we've got the cookie crumbs all over us. We've gone from coloring the couch to coloring all over the walls as well. Quick! Hurry up! Act like nothing's wrong! Act natural. No, don't act natural, act holy!

Well, friends, the good news in all this is that God is indeed **dangerous**. God is dangerous to those of us who would oppose Him, yes. But God is also dangerous because God is as unpredictable and disturbing to our status quo as a newborn baby.

We come to this time every year to pray to and worship and sing about this sweet little baby Jesus in His golden fleece diapers. But this newborn Christ child is no different, and yet very different, from any other newborn; just ask Mary and Joseph. For this sweet little baby intends to disturb *our* lives as well. And in fact this child is downright *dangerous* to any plans that we make for ourselves. For this child is none other than Emmanuel, God With Us in all of His holiness. As C.S. Lewis writes in *The Lion, The Witch And The Wardrobe*, “He is not quite safe, but he is good.”

The dangerousness of God presents us with and pushes us into places and situations that we’re not quite so sure about, as illustrated in the video that we just saw. Do we help out the homeless person, even if our mind is telling us cynically that they’re just going to go spend the money on stuff that they don’t really need?

We read about this type of thing all through the pages of Scripture. Abraham and Sarah, who were called to leave everything and everyone that they knew to go to a land, and by the way, I’ll tell you when you get there, says the Lord. I’m not going to tell you ahead of time. Folks like Moses, who was called to go back to Egypt to lead, where he felt like he didn’t belong. Folks like Gideon, who were called literally out of hiding to lead the Israelites into battle. You fast-forward through the pages of Scripture, of course, to Mary, who was called to bear God’s son, even at the prospect of facing social shame and ridicule.

The dangerousness of God interrupts our lives with calls to unexpected places in unexpected ways, such that others might look at us with that look of surprise or even horror, of “Where did *that* come from?” Maybe it’s speaking up when someone tells a joke that demeans someone else. Maybe it’s choosing not to participate in the rumor mill and gossip mill, so prevalent in small towns like ours, and asking friends to do the same. Maybe it’s taking extra time to thoroughly research facts about hot-button issues before automatically reposting them on social media just because we agree with them. And even then, we don’t always get it right.

Early on in ministry, God sort of thrust me into a position I wish I wasn’t in, but stepped into nonetheless. I served a church that was a pretty white church in a neighborhood that was changing racially all around us. And by white I meant...look around. Pretty much like us. So we ended up hiring a new choir director and pianist, and this guy happened to be African American. So on his first Sunday, this lady pulls me aside as I’m stepping into the sanctuary to start worship. And she says, “Dan. I got to thinking, and you don’t think anybody will have a problem with his being...well, you know.” And I looked at her and said, “No, I don’t know. What?” She said, “Well, come on. You know what I’m talking about.” I said, “That he has a master’s degree in music education from James Madison University and he’s willing to work for our chump change as our choir director? I don’t think anybody would have a problem with that.”

“Well, come on. You know...”

“All right, look. It’s time for worship. I don’t have time for this. I can’t think of anybody. Can you?”

“Well, I don’t want to name any names.”

“No. I don’t play the anonymous complaint game. Who?”

“Well...some of our older members.”

I said, “Well, look. You keep your eyes and ears open for that kind of talk, and I’ll do the same. And if you hear any of that kind of talk, you ask them to come talk to me, because I have a zero-tolerance policy for that kind of crap. Let’s worship.”

And as I walked away from her, I heard her say, “I’ve never heard Dan talk like that before!” And what convicted me was, *I’ve never heard Dan talk like that before!*

But God is dangerous. And if God is dangerous and God lives inside us when we invite Jesus Christ into our lives, then that makes *us* dangerous also. We become holy because God is holy. Not because of what we do, but because of what God’s spirit does in us and through us and in spite of us.

Friends, we have a dangerous God. The question is, do we have a dangerous faith? For when we welcome Him into our lives, we can no longer look the other way. We can no longer get away with the look of surprise, and we can no longer tuck our tail and run. And thanks be to God for that. Amen.