

This is the final Sunday of Advent which is also the hardest one to maintain that Advent-y feel. Advent's all about waiting, and the closer we get to the thing we're waiting for, the harder it is to make ourselves keep waiting. We're waiting for that manger scene, but we're also waiting for Jesus' return on clouds descending. The former's cute and inspiring; the latter oughta make us a little nervous 'cause with Jesus' return comes a distinct need to be caught doing right. Remember that whole *imago dei* thing we've talked about? Because the Creation Story says we're all created in God's image, we all bear a sliver of the image of God unique to each one of us. And because of that, I gotta treat you like I bear that image, and I gotta treat you like you bear that image.

With that in mind, let's talk about the elephant in just about every room since Friday. You know, [REDACTED]. I wish I didn't have to say that what happened on that island is sinful, but these days, you can't be too clear. What happened on that island is sinful. Now, Christianity certainly doesn't have a sterling track record on this one. And if we look to scripture, it's a mixed bag. Cultural context and historical differences matter, but even so, it's tough to hear some of our ancient texts refer to what we usually see as problematic. Though scripture never reveals their actual ages, by the time the angel Gabriel shows up, Mary was probably in her early teens. Joseph was at the youngest, late 20s, early 30s, old enough to be established with a career and a house and the means to provide for his soon-to-be bride. Some traditions say he's 90 to emphasize just how unlikely it was for the baby Jesus to be his! Truth is, we just don't know, but Mary's youth and the age gap between them is enough to make imagining the marriage a little uncomfortable for modern readers. For what it's worth, the original word translated as "virgin" in the Greek account of Isaiah and the Gospels doesn't actually mean "virgin." It means "young girl." Now, you could argue, and many do, that the intent is the same, but the troubling ambiguity remains.

There's another version of the story that emphasizes that ambiguity, and this is a tough one. It's not in scripture, mind you, so take this with a whole pillar of salt. But, this version starts with a Roman Centurion named [REDACTED] who takes advantage of Mary and leaves the young girl to fend for her injured self. If that's the case, the resulting child would've been born just about as low in the societal hierarchy as anyone could be. Joseph comes across as more caring and understanding, Mary as more tragic, more sympathetic, her innocence stolen from the story, and the bastard child born in a manger not just an impossible ask to bear but also a shame, an insult, an injury personified. That child would be a constant reminder of the insurmountable power of the empire pinning the people down. In that version, God doesn't enter the story until a little later. Some time before the child learns to tell evil from good, God inhabits the child, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Now, I gotta tell ya, that's not what the church says it believes, but it does emphasize the ability of God to overcome the worst brutality of humanity and empire and redeem even the most painful abuses humankind can commit. That version makes Jesus, Mary, and even Joseph not all that unique with Mary experiencing the same kind of violation all too many women not just across that empire but across history've borne. The whole family's relatable not because they're miraculous from the start; they're relatable because they're painfully normal. The miracle in that story isn't solely who Jesus'll become, it's who Jesus'll become in spite of who he started as. All that upside-down Kingdom of God stuff inverting the way things are for the way things should be...that story takes that side of the Nativity and ramps it up. Again, it's not our canonical version, but I think it's worth holding in tension with the story we're so familiar with, especially now, as the depth of [REDACTED's] inhumane injustices come to light.

Regardless of which version or versions you hold to, there's another aspect of all this that's deeply troubling. When God becomes human in the person of Jesus, however you take that to happen, one of the many names adopted is Emmanuel, which means "God is With Us." The Incarnation of Christ means we aren't alone. God is with us. And God is with us everywhere. Everywhere. Think about where that means God is. From the most obvious places to the least likely, God is with us. That's wonderful, if a little unnerving. It's also deeply frustrating. If God is with us, then how can [REDACTED] happen? The answer's far simpler than we like: people are people. God is with all of us. That whole *imago dei* thing, where every person bears a sliver of the image of God, that whole *imago dei* thing emphasizes just how beautiful some moments are and just how terrible others are. The sacred in me serving the sacred in you...that's wonderful and lovely and it amplifies the already sacred beauty of a human serving another human, elevates it to my belief being so deeply rooted in your sacredness that I would risk the sacredness I carry to better you and yours. Gorgeous.

But it works the other direction, too. Horrific acts disregard the sacredness of everyone involved, including the perpetrator's. That disregard flaunts evil in God's place and attacks not just the person -- which certainly's bad enough on its own -- but attacks the sacred sliver of God that person carries. It's not just physical and psychological abuse, it's spiritual, too. It breaks something inside that takes much longer to heal than the physical harm -- which certainly takes long enough on its own. In other words, [REDACTED] isn't just an affront to humanity, it's an affront to God. Or, as Isaiah puts it, it's too little for them to weary mortals, so they must weary God, too. I don't think it's any surprise that the unfathomably wealthy and powerful do awful things. Most folks've known that for a long time, but how remained hidden. We're learning just how rotten some parts of our world are. Way too many instances of sacred, cherished humanity broken by incredibly broken people.

That prayer we started the service with, that collect meant just for today, asks for the presence of God to purify our conscience. Done in earnest, that's a wonderful desire. But I wonder, as the powerful flaunt their ability to get away with whatever they like, I wonder if their prayer is more "Purify our conscience and redact the rest." If we're moving through these final days of Advent with the possibility, even the hope that that big, scary, clouds-descending Jesus might actually get here before baby-in-the-manger Jesus, we oughta perk up and get real ready. And if the ways of those in power reflect something about the health of our society, I'd be mortified for Jesus to come back now with so many sins so openly hidden. But we need it.

When she was still alive and awful news or haunting stories came to light, my judiciously foul-mouthed grandma used to say, "Jesus, I'm sure you've got a lot on your plate, but whenever's convenient, it sure would be nice if you'd come on down and [REDACT] their [REDACTED] [REDACTEDS]. Baby Jesus'll be cooing in the manger soon enough, but it's not that sweet child I'm waiting for today. Like my grandma, I'm waiting for that purifying, unsparing, justice-oriented Jesus to get here, 'cause God knows we need that purifying, unsparing, unredacted justice now.