

**PRIVILY**  
**Matthew 1:18-25**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent, Festival Sunday, December 22,  
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*Now the birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise:*

*When as his mother Mary was espoused to Joseph, before they came together, she was found with child of the Holy Ghost. Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily. But while he thought on these things, behold, the angel of the Lord appeared unto him in a dream, saying,*

*Joseph, thou son of David,  
fear not to take unto thee Mary thy wife:  
for that which is conceived in her is of the Holy Ghost.  
And she shall bring forth a son,  
and thou shalt call his name JESUS:  
for he shall save his people from their sins.*

*Now all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying,*

*Behold, a virgin shall be with child,  
and shall bring forth a son,  
and they shall call his name Emmanuel,  
which being interpreted is,  
God with us.*

*Then Joseph being raised from sleep did as the angel of the Lord had bidden him, and took unto him his wife: And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS.*

I.

One thing I enjoy about this time of year is the opportunity it provides for reverting to the King James language of scripture, even though that language is admittedly harder for us to understand than translations in vernacular more familiar to us.

Two years ago, Alexis Bittner, a child in our church, garnered our attention and admiration at the Lessons and Carols service when, before a full congregation, she read the word “cockatrice” flawlessly from the prophet Isaiah.<sup>1</sup>

Two weeks ago, it was Ben Henry’s turn. He too had been asked to read the “cockatrice” passage.

His parents shared with me that they were worried about his seven-year-old vocabulary being able to pronounce words from a version of the Bible translated over 500 years ago.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah 11:8: “...the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice’ den.”

But my understanding is that Ben rehearsed under the guidance of his parents several times in the week leading up to the service; and it showed, for he responded with a flawless reading.

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They were also concerned that Ben would not *understand* what he was reading; and the truth is, he likely did not. But neither do most of us understand much of what we read in Scripture, no matter what translations we read.

The good news is that when any of us read an ancient text – particularly Scripture – we – like Ben – are led into the realm of the Holy:

- We are led into that space – if space it is – *from which* God originates and *in which* God alone resides
- We are led into that space which none of us can enter directly or fully, especially in this life, especially of our own accord.

Opening the Bible and reading its holy text is akin to walking through an unlit garden at night or opening the door into a deep, cedar closet with no lights in the room and only a faint idea of the clothes we may find hanging there.

The words we read in Scripture – in their opacity to us – bear witness to the *mystery* of the God who is the *divine subject* of the book and *primary character*, whether identified or not. The otherworldly sound and feel of much of the Bible reminds us that “God’s thoughts are not our thoughts, God’s ways not our ways”<sup>2</sup> and that, book in hand or screen open before us, we see now only “in a mirror dimly.”<sup>3</sup>

## I.

A specific word from our scripture reading this morning caught my attention when I heard it at this year’s Lessons and Carols services, read not by a child but by two well-trained pastors. It is the word “privily.” P-R-I-V-I-L-Y.

The word is used by Matthew to depict Joseph’s reaction when Joseph finds that his fiancé Mary is expecting a child and he is not the father. Matthew writes:

*Then Joseph her husband, being a just man, and not willing to make her a publick example, was minded to put her away privily.*

In the religious and cultural tradition in which Mary and Joseph live – there are laws and norms for how to respond to a situation in which there is a pregnancy without a marriage, laws and norms that are still alive in some cultures in our day. The Biblical responses range from a “trial by ordeal” – described graphically in Numbers 5 – or death by stoning, called for in Deuteronomy 22.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 55:8-9.

<sup>3</sup> I Corinthians 13:12.

<sup>4</sup> See Numbers 5:11-31 and Deuteronomy 22:13-30, especially verse 21.

Matthew describes Joseph as a “*just*” man – a person who is righteous within his religious tradition and faithful to its laws and norms. But Matthew also depicts Joseph as a person whose intentions and character lie on the *merciful* side of righteousness rather than on its *punitive* side. Thus, Joseph resolves to divorce Mary as the law *requires*, but to divorce her *quietly*, to spare her at least some public humiliation. The word used in King James is “privily.”<sup>5</sup>

“*Joseph was minded to put her away privily.*”

## II.

Let’s think for a minute about the meaning of “privily” as Mary might have experienced it. Since Matthew tells the story through Joseph’s eyes, unlike Luke, who tells it through Mary’s eyes, we are placing ourselves in the realm of the religious imagination. But imagination – religious imagination – is part of what comes *from* and *during* the reading of a text that occupies holy space.

- When Mary leaves the story and community, she receives the gift of quiet: the space and time to think, to feel, to pray, to hope, to grieve, outside the pronouncements of preacher or politician, outside the pressure of peer or public.
- Mary receives the space and time to discern “what is next” for her and the child she will bear, even though the choices for an expectant single mother in her economic circumstances are limited.
- But in the privacy of her home and closest relationships, in the privacy of her own heart and mind, in the privacy of her soul and conscience, she finds space and time, to re-learn – or learn for the first time – the she is a *soul* cherished by God with a *conscience* of which only God is Lord.

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In his poem “St. Francis and the Sow,” Galway Kinnell writes:

... sometimes it is necessary  
to reteach a thing its loveliness,  
to put a hand on its brow  
of the flower  
and retell it in words and in touch  
it is lovely  
until it flowers again...  
as Saint Francis  
put his hand on the creased forehead  
of the sow, and told her in words and in touch  
blessings of earth on the sow, and the sow  
began remembering all down her thick length,  
from the earthen snout all the way  
through the fodder and slops to the spiritual curl of the tail,  
from the hard spininess spiked out from the spine

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<sup>5</sup> Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1977), 128.

down through the great broken heart  
to the sheer blue milken dreaminess spurting and shuddering  
from the fourteen teats into the fourteen mouths sucking and blowing beneath them:  
the long, perfect loveliness of sow.<sup>6</sup>

Privily. Privily. In the quiet of the early weeks of her pregnancy, Mary relearned through “words and...touch” her own “long, perfect loveliness...”

### III.

On another level, the word “privily” bears witness to the reality that the experience each of us has with God is often at its most *intense* and *significant* when we are alone, in private, subject only to sky and stars.

- Following the incident of the Golden Calf, Moses ascends Mt. Sinai a second time to implore God to forgive the people of Israel for molding a god they could see and touch and feel. Moses’ intercession brings leniency on the part of the Holy One, yet even then God covers Moses’ eyes so that Moses sees only God’s backside, not God’s face.<sup>7</sup> Like Mary, Moses is *alone*...with God...in Moses’ case, on a mountain.
- A few books later in the Old Testament, after confronting the evil duo of King Ahab and Queen Jezebel and the false prophets worshipping the Ba’als so anathema to Israel’s faith, Elijah the Prophet flees to Mt. Horeb, likely the same mountain Moses ascended. While alone, like Mary, Elijah encounters God not in the expected ways of “earthquake, wind, and fire,” but rather in “a still, small voice,” “a sound of sheer silence.”<sup>8</sup> Elijah, too, is *alone* on the mountain.
- When Isaiah is performing his regular priestly duties in the Temple, God appears and calls Isaiah to become a prophet; yet even then, Isaiah sees only the hem of God’s garment.<sup>9</sup> Again, Isaiah is alone in the Temple, alone like Mary.

Each of these vaulted figures of our faith – Moses, Elijah, Isaiah – are precursors to Mary’s experience God: alone: in quiet, privily.

### IV.

Over the years, in preaching about the birth of Christ, I have been moved by members of the church who share – often with great eloquence – their profound experiences of God.

A few weeks ago, in one of the Bible classes I teach, a longtime member and student, shared following devotional as part of a devotional to open class. She is allowing me to share it with you.

Most of us never know what true silence is. We’re surrounded by constant noises: air-conditioning, heating units, cars, television, radio, even the wind. And for our children and grandchildren so much more.

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<sup>6</sup> From Galway Kinnell, *Three Books* (New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2002), available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/42683/saint-francis-and-the-sow>.

<sup>7</sup> Exodus 33:12-33.

<sup>8</sup> I Kings 19:11-18.

<sup>9</sup> Isaiah 6:1-9.

It's a rarity when you experience complete silence.

My husband's first assignment in the Air Force was in California. We spent almost 5 years there and then he got his 2nd orders to the dreaded and remote Thule Air Base in Greenland.... (What a misnomer--not a bit of greenery anywhere.) The base is 600 miles from the North Pole.

As part of his survival training, he was driven out on to the ice cap in a snow cat, which is a truck on treadmills, and deposited 15 miles from civilization. There he was required to build a fighter trench which would allow him to survive in 30-40 degree below temperatures while awaiting pick-up if he had had to bail out of his fighter jet.

Left alone by the survival instructor, he built his fighter trench, undressed completely (rules of his special sleeping bag), and, with the help of a candle, was able to raise the temperature in his trench to just around freezing.

And-----for the first time in his life, [he] experienced the TOTAL ABSENCE OF SOUND:-  
COMPLETE SILENCE!!

EXCEPT for ONE NOISE.

He was astounded to realize it was the beating of his heart pumping the blood through his veins.

She continued:

I'm sure most of us will never experience that degree of silence.

All of you probably have felt God's presence in many instances in your lives. It's not as if HE speaks to you directly...His presence can be felt by you because you had quiet moments of thought and prayer that caused you to recognize HIS presence.

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In Mary's time "quiet away-ness," perhaps she too heard the sound of her own heartbeat. Perhaps she heard the sound of the heartbeat of the infant forming within her. Or perhaps in silence she heard words parallel to those the Lord spoke to her husband Joseph in a dream: "Fear not..."

Whatever Mary's experience, it prepared her for what lay ahead: months of pregnancy, risks of childbirth, a sudden flight to Egypt by night to escape Herod's deadly rule, time as a refugee in Egypt, an equally sudden return to her native land – not to Bethlehem where she had given birth, but to Nazareth in Galilee – where she committed, like nearly every parent, to putting her all into rearing her child to become the person God had destined her child to be.<sup>10</sup>

Her strength, her energy, her focus, her courage, her tenacity: All coming through the sound of a heartbeat, the sound of silence. All privily.

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Matthew 2:13-23.