

Scrubbing Off What American Christianity Got Wrong

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[0 : 00] So good morning, Table Church. Good morning. And Merry Almost Christmas. My name is Tonetta and I'm one of the pastors here at the Table Church.

! And I'm delighted to be before you on this fourth Sunday of Advent. As some of you know, I'm not someone who grew up observing the waxings and wanings of the church calendar.

I've said many times that in my house lit was something that you picked off of your clothes and put into the trash can. I didn't discover the church calendar until well into my 20s.

Yet the church calendar has become for me a deeply meaningful way of marking time. Of measuring the year not by the calendar of consumerism.

Not by the holy days of civil religion and empire. But rather by the rhythms of the gospel story. The mountaintops and the valley places of Jesus' life.

[1 : 11] The church calendar is a subversive way of keeping the sacred at the center. Against all the forces that dehumanize and disintegrate.

Advent is in particular considered the beginning of the church year. It's kind of the new year of the church. It's a time when we focus on the origin of our faith.

It's a time of anticipation and watchfulness for the arrival of the coming Messiah. And whatever else watchfulness means, it requires a slowness of soul.

Just as I was praying about. It requires us being fully inside the present moment. It asks of us the precise thing that is hardest to come by amid the rush and the merrymaking of December.

So because of this, for the past couple of years, I've sought kind of like an anchor to hold me fast during the swells of this season. I've learned to look for something really simple.

[2 : 24] A word or a phrase or a brief piece of scripture or maybe even a question. Last year, I found it in Scott Erickson's devotional, Honest Advent.

As I pondered a piece of art he had created for that day, for his day one in the Advent devotional. It was a day about the annunciation, the announcement to Mary that she would bear a son.

Revelation, he says, is a hard gift to receive. You must give up everything to receive it. Like finding a treasure in a field and selling everything you have to get that treasure.

May you receive the light of divine annunciation in the flames of your best laid plans. Those words and that piece of art, which I think is on the screen, took root in my heart and helped me take stock of my own capacity to receive revelation that doesn't conform to my expectations and has the potential to set on fire my known world.

This year, the anchor that is holding me fast is also grounded in an image. It comes from Erna Kim Hackett's 2025 devotional download, which I cannot recommend highly enough.

[3 : 56] Hackett is the founder of Liberate It Together. And she writes these words. Korean culture has an amazing bath and scrub tradition.

It's not like American spas. American spas are all about soft music, dim lighting, and good smelling oils. A Korean spa is a middle-aged person who is utterly unfazed by your pain, scrubbing every inch of your flesh until dead skin you didn't even know was there rolls off your body.

They do not care about your modesty or self-consciousness. Their job is to scrub off the dead skin that has been building up since your last visit.

It will not be comfortable, but you will be clean. You will wonder if you have ever bathed before.

And in the end, it is a wonderful ritual. Advent is a spiritual Korean scrub.

[5 : 06] By living in the United States within an empire where Christian nationalism feels increasingly normal and violence is widely tolerated, the buildup happens slowly.

And most of the time, we do not even notice it. But in Korea, there is a rhythm built in of deep scrubbing. It is woven into ordinary life because people understand that even when you cannot see it, dirt still accumulates.

Advent is that same kind of ritual. It is an invitation to scrub off what has quietly built up on us. This fourth Sunday of Advent is an opportunity to scrub off our numbness, our immobilization in the face of violence, our capitulations to coercion, our simple and bored resistance to the riches of wonder. Today, we light the love candle, praying that it soften us and make us tender again. Aside from not growing up inside the rhythms of the church calendar, I also did not grow up with any particular reverence for the hymns of Christmas.

I was nourished on nutrient-rich soul, hip-hop, and gospel. I know some of y'all were too. The Christmas season didn't start for me until me and my mother had belted out Silent Night to the Temptations, like we were one of the temptations.

[6 : 43] And it didn't end until I had gone up into the third heaven in church to Kirk Franklin's Now Behold the Lamb Thank You worship team. It wasn't until my adulthood when I realized that most of the traditional Christmas songs that I had found so tiring were actually profoundly theological.

One that I have been considering this year as we have moved through our current sermon series is O Little Town of Bethlehem.

It contains a phrase jam-packed with meaning, but which we often overlook. When speaking of the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem, the song says, The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.

Fear and hope. Hope and fear. It can be so easy to make the Christmas story into a fairy tale, to reduce Bethlehem to a quaint nativity scene.

But then, as now, Bethlehem was a place of occupation. A place where, then, as now, oppression, displacement, violence, economic inequality, and social instability were rampant.

[8 : 06] The Christmas story takes place, after all, in the time of Herod. An atmosphere that has been the reality for far too long for so many people, not least our Palestinian siblings.

The Christmas story takes place on the darkest night, in the interminable wait for the light to come, and in dealing with the fear that maybe the light never will.

The Christmas story encourages us to name our fears instead of just generalizing them. And it invites us to hope.

Hope may actually be the one thing that is harder for us to talk about than fear. Especially when we are talking about the elusive hope that refuses to pose as optimism.

We believe that talk of hope obscures one of the truest things we know. That we have every reason to be afraid.

[9 : 12] In light of that truth, we are right to reject the sham of optimism. But we must not confuse optimism with hope.

Mary Ann McKibben Dana says this about the difference between optimism and hope in her book, Hope, A User's Manual. Optimism does its best work in the before.

When the evidence points plausibly in a positive direction. When you can still anticipate the best possible outcome. When things could work out okay.

But when the facts suggest otherwise optimism isn't enough. This is when hope comes in, rolls up her sleeves and says, Optimism, take a seat.

I've heard optimism described as a mathematical construct, an equation, in which past experience plus present striving equals future greatness. Optimism relies on external circumstances lining up in a certain way.

[10 : 20] Hope isn't mathematical. It's philosophical, physical, and maybe even musical. True hope defies cause and effect and has impact regardless of outcome.

The hopes and fears of all the years infuse these Christmas stories.

In particular, the angel's appearance to Joseph in a dream and Joseph's response to that is an excellent place to learn how we might respond to fear and become, as the prophet Zechariah puts it, prisoners of hope.

When the writer Matthew begins his origin story of Jesus, he starts with a genealogy. Then he commences the story that many of us are familiar with, the story that Elliot read.

Before Matthew tells us of the angel's appearance to Joseph in a dream, though he brings us up to speed. He tells us what has happened before. Mary and Joseph have become engaged in what

was a legally binding ceremony.

[11 : 36] But within the year or so between when they would have gotten engaged and when they would actually have gotten married and consummated that marriage, Mary becomes pregnant.

When Joseph finds out about Mary's pregnancy, Joseph did not believe the explanation that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit. I mean, really, who could?

Can you imagine one of your female friends, one of your homegirls coming up and being like, yeah, you know what, I'm pregnant from the Holy Spirit. What would you say? How would you deal with that? So many of us would have a lot of questions, just as Joseph did, I'm sure.

I wonder what also, aside from skepticism, Joseph might have felt leaving Elizabeth's house after hearing the news.

The devastation of heartbreak, betrayal, humiliation, anger. Maybe he started hearing the beat in his head to Carrie Underwoods before he cheats.

[12 : 42] And he started singing with gusto. I dug my key into the side of his... Thank you, Keong, son. Thank you. Oh, okay.

Okay. Pastoral counseling is available, okay? It's a good song. It's such a good song. Thank you. I imagine that Joseph is furious and hurt.

He is just a carpenter who does odd jobs around town. He enjoys working outside and working with his hands. He puts in hard days of work and knows the value of doing things well.

How could something like this happen to him? But even with all of that hurt and anger, Joseph doesn't express any of it. He's a good boy.

Just as I was raised to be a good girl. Just as many of us, many of you were taught to be obedient. Joseph was righteous, which meant he was committed to God's revealed will as expressed by the letter of the law.

[14 : 00] And it is clear that his righteousness is already tinged with mercy. Just divorcing Mary quietly without expressing public reproach or public explanation probably would have led people to blame him.

To think that he also had violated society's rules of purity if he didn't give an explanation. Yet even within his righteousness tinged with mercy, it's through his angelic dream that he learns what every disciple of Jesus must learn.

One of the hardest truths, actually, of Jesus to actually practice. The difference between you have heard that it was said and but I say to you.

See, the angel in Joseph's dream calls him to something further and higher than righteousness tinged with mercy. The angel calls him to something beyond charity.

The angel invites him to solidarity and proximity and radical involvement with what cannot be explained. He is invited to do not be afraid when there must have been so much to fear.

[15 : 21] Loss of status in an honor-shame culture. Fear of lack of relevance in a society in which having children biologically was everything.

Fear of being defined by a woman's calling instead of his own. Fear of what all this said about his masculinity as a man who so clearly didn't control his woman's body.

Fear of being defined by a woman's body. Fear of being defined by a woman's body. I wonder if there were moments in which his fear tempted him to the manufacturing of idols. Just as occurs in the Isaiah passage that was read for us this morning.

The artisan encourages the goldsmith and the one who smooths the hammer encourages the one who strikes the anvil, saying of the soldering, it is God. And they fasten the idol with nails so that it cannot be moved.

Was there a split second when Joseph wanted to retreat to the safety of the idol of biblical manhood, which then, as now, is only thinly veiled patriarchy?

[16 : 32] Was there a second when he wanted to shore up the idol of us versus them, scapegoating Mary for the preservation of his own social status?

Was there a moment when Joseph was further tempted to manufacture the idol of purity, saying that just one drop of anything considered unclean, whether racial or religious or sexual, made Mary a second-class citizen, consigned to the edges of the story, even as she made that story possible? Whatever Joseph's first reactions may have been, he ultimately refuses to participate in the cycle of idolatry and inhumanity.

Instead, he reaches out a hand, choosing to create a cycle of solidarity. He does the dangerous thing and in so doing, faces and transforms the fears that could have so easily led to disconnection and isolation for Mary.

Joseph shields the life, the sacred life growing inside of Mary and ends up protecting and providing for the savior of the world. When Erna Kim Hackett compares Advent to a Korean scrub, she adds this particularity.

[18 : 07] We must scrub off what is normative to American Christianity, but antithetical to Jesus. Joseph is the model of this needed scrubbing off in Matthew's gospel.

For one, the story of Joseph invites us to scrub off patriarchy. As a man, Joseph has to give up being the main character of the story.

He has to submit to the calling of his wife. This is like the only time I like the word submit. He has to submit to the calling of his wife. Yeah, in the years when I read John Piper and Wayne Grudem voraciously, nobody ever told me that Joseph was the model of biblical manhood.

That his choice of nurture and care and solidarity is a blow against coercive and dominating power. Joseph's power is in his subversive tenderness.

It is in embracing the feminine, not just as something to possess, but rather as something to embody. If you are a person of privilege in this room, a man or white or a person economically doing pretty well, consider sitting with some of these questions for the next few days.

[19 : 34] These are questions from the devotionals that inform this sermon. Where in my life am I clinging to being the main character? What would it mean to faithfully accompany instead?

In what ways this year have I chosen charity over solidarity? And in the new year, how can I change that? If you are not in one of the privileged categories, consider this question.

How might I lean into main character energy? And practice the faith to ask for and the willingness to receive support. And then as a church, we can ask who among us is carrying something sacred and heavy, quietly in danger.

And how might we acknowledge that and act? But the story of Joseph not only gives us a model of what it looks like to scrub off patriarchy, it also shows us how to scrub off coercive power by embracing humility.

For me, humility used to almost be a dirty word, despite the number of times the Bible uses it. That is, until I realized that humility is the exact opposite of the posture of empires.

[21 : 01] See, Joseph and Mary are living in the time of Herod, the pretender to the messianic line, someone who was a puppet king of Rome, and who saw prestige through these massive building projects and displays of wealth.

But in Herod's shadow, we learn of the power of Joseph, a man from whose mouth not a single word of Scripture is attributed. Joseph is literally giving not one word in Scripture, and he's barely mentioned outside of this one story.

As Pastor Adam Hamilton writes, Herod was a builder on a massive scale. Joseph was a simple carpenter. Herod lived a kind of prodigal and wanton lifestyle, always pursuing the affirmation of others.

Joseph lived a life of simplicity and humility, seeking primarily to please God. Joseph is the patron saint of those who give themselves to God, who live a costly faith and never receive nor expect any credit.

I often think of Mary as the one who nurtured Jesus in the ways of revolution, in her bold belief that in God's economy, the mighty had already been cast down.

[22 : 22] But I suspect that Jesus learned humility from Joseph, receive the seeds from Joseph's steady, faithful life that would flower into such teaching as, you know the rulers of the Gentiles lorded over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

It will not be so among you, but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first must be your slave.

Joseph scrubs off patriarchy and scrubs off coercive power. And I don't want to sit down before I remind us that what allows Joseph to scrub off those things is that Joseph listens to the dream given him at night in a situation in which he was utterly out of control.

Here's Erna's comment again. I call her Erna. She's like my best friend. She doesn't know it, but she is. She says this. It is no accident that revelation in this story comes at night.

In the face of danger and state violence as Jesus' arrival hangs by a thread, Matthew shows us that one of the antidotes to empire is mystery, dreams, angels, and night.

[23 : 50] It suggests that the spirituality we need to survive this era is not the one many of us were given. Not mountaintop highs and self-improvement, but a spirituality of descent, hiddenness, mystery, and deep attunement in the darkest of night.

Now, in Matthew's account, Joseph is the one who, because of his willingness to scrub off patriarchy, to scrub off coercive power, because of his willingness to nourish a dream received at night, Joseph is the one who is asked to name the Messiah.

Because he does not let his fear suffocate his hope, he becomes a shaping influence in the life of Jesus. Friends, the one, the one who is God with us, the one who has come in the past, will come in the future, and longs to come to us in the present, asks us today to receive him, to love him as Joseph did.

The one who scrubbed off divinity for the sake of vulnerability, for the sake of the vulnerability of a womb, invites you past your numbness, past your immobilization in the face of violence, past your capitulations to coercion, past your simple and bored resistance to the riches of wonder.

Today, may you receive your king, raised by a carpenter who knew how to chisel hope out of fear.

[25 : 45] Amen.