

It is very interesting to sort through the cards you receive at Christmas time. You will likely see all kinds of scenes and symbols that, over the years, have edged their way into the celebration.

If the card features a landscape scene, it will likely be a quaint New England town buried under a perfect blanket of snow, rather than a dusty watering hole in the Palestinian desert! More horse-drawn sleigh, than mother-to-be on a bent over mule.

Angels are also big on the card scene but these angels bear little relation to the angels that appear in scripture passages such as today's reading in Matthew, because the ones on our cards are demure, cuddly-looking creatures, more debutante than messenger of God - not at all the type that would ever need to announce "Fear not!" whenever they appeared with their loud, shocking, terrifying life-altering message about God's intervention in the ways of the world!

Even the explicitly religious cards that focus on the holy family, feature an overly perfect grouping – unruffled, well-groomed – serene – untouched and untouchable – with bright halos, seemingly from another world, hovering just above their heads.

Whatever the image the text carried in these cards stresses sunny words like love, good will, cheer, happiness, and warmth. I have to tell you, that such homey sentiments are at odds with the entire tone of the real Incarnation. In the real birth of Jesus event we should be looking for dislocation, we should be expecting and preparing for disruption. Disruption runs deep into and across the whole story.....

"Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way" is how Matthew begins his matter-of-fact treatment of the nativity. We hear that Joseph is not the biological father of Jesus, his role is to name Jesus, doing what God asks him to do. Jesus is to be the child's name because "he will save his people". Through the quiet, unwavering obedience of Joseph, God's plan for the world will advance.

We fall into a trap when we overlay a modern, western conception of morals on this story. We assume that there was a prohibition against marital relations before marriage, but there wasn't. Mary was betrothed to Joseph, as such she was effectively his wife already, whether the "marriage ceremony" had happened yet or not, so the community would not have been outraged or even surprised that Mary was pregnant. In that culture, once a woman was betrothed to a man, this couple would get pregnant – in an agrarian culture where child-bearing was a necessity this was the only way you could tell if the woman was fertile, and then came marriage.

The only two people who could be upset over all this are Joseph and Mary, because she and he know that this baby was not his! Nobody else knows that, so she hasn't been shamed. The only way she would be in danger from community opinion would be if Joseph announced that he is not the father – thereby accusing her of being a woman with loose morals! Joseph wrestles with this dilemma - Does he tell or doesn't he? It seems he resolves to part company with Mary but to part company quietly. This was the chaos that was swirling around in the mind of Joseph until he was ready and willing to listen to God! That was the chaos that has Joseph bolt upright in bed in the middle of the night, so stupefied that he utters not a word in response to what the angels tell him and which Joseph obeys in marrying Mary and welcoming this Child and naming Him, Jesus.

The child to be born Joseph hears, "is from the Holy Spirit."

This is the Holy Spirit who hovers over the chaos that precedes Genesis 1 and creates a new world, a new heaven and a new earth;

this is the same Holy Spirit who creates a way through the waters leading Israel from slavery to a new beginning;

the very Holy Spirit who calls and nerves prophets and disciples and martyrs for the faith to dangerous acts of obedience;

the Holy Spirit who at Pentecost will establish the church as a community of service and mission.

This Advent, even today, this very same Holy Spirit desires to begin something new in our lives and in the life of the world.

The Holy Spirit of God wishes to forbid us from falling disinterested or becoming exhausted!

This Holy Spirit wishes to nerve us to continue believing, to fill us so that we might have more to share!

This Holy Spirit desires to put the very life of God in us replacing despair with hope, death with life, injury with pardon, hatred with love, sadness with joy!

This Holy Spirit calls us to turn around and live new lives, to tune our living so we can receive and learn and echo God's love song for and to the world.

This Advent, even today, even right here in this community and congregation this same Holy Spirit desires to begin something new in your life and in the life of faith, commitment and service to which all of us are being called.

I remember as a young boy back in Scotland when there was to be a Wedding at the Church the Minister would read what were called the Wedding Banns – informing the congregation and the community of the upcoming nuptials. These banns were written in very legal terms but they always began, “There is a purpose of marriage between... Mr. So and So, Bachelor and Miss So and So, spinster, of this Parish.... etc. etc.” The banns prepared the way for the new relationship.

I say to you today, in the birth of Jesus Christ, in the promise of the Holy Spirit, “there is a purpose of a new relationship” between the living God and you ... between the living God and all of you and all of creation. “There is a purpose of new lives of faith and hope, and peace and joy and love being lived in Rock Hill and beyond. “There is a purpose” of a deeper devotion in life and faith- for you and for you all.

Advent and Christmas and the news of the coming to which they point contain the deep spiritual truth: there is no way for God to save us, to deal with our “God problem,” our alienation from our Creator, without some disruption and dislocation. And that is a huge part of the whole tragedy of the false bill of goods that we are being offered by the trappings of the season that we have so elevated that they truly risk obscuring the entire Godly reality of Christmas. We are being sold a sentimental mush that

suggest that our Christmas “spirit” our Yuletide high jinks can somehow bring us together, heal all the family rifts, that “every kiss begins with Kays”, that we’ll all be home for Christmas... when all along the Christ in Christmas, Christ and Christmas is, and needs to be about disruption and dislocation! For only in a true meeting and a full and true response to the Christ of Christmas will we discover that we are loved and held by God, and so are changed and renewed people.

Of course many of us do feel chaos at that this time of year! When asked we say we aren’t even close to being ready for Christmas! By that reply we usually mean that there we still have a lot to do for our celebration of the “Big Day” rather than an assessment of our readiness to be embraced by the love and justice of God. Are you ready for Christmas – well not really we have so much to do – presents to buy and wrap, meals to prepare, sermons to write, parties to attend or give. Our failure to be truly ready for the truth of Christmas is deepened by our over-wrought focus on the cultural trappings of the season which paralyze and distract and divert us from the real “business” of Advent: preparing for the great celebration of the birth of Emmanuel, God-with-us. For it is this birth, this Advent, this arrival of God in our midst, that is the real disruption and the true hope of the season.

Some years ago, a movement began with the title and aim: “Put Christ Back into Christmas.” No doubt prompted by the commercialization of the season, the attempt was pointless. We all know that the Holy Child has never been “out” of Christmas. We know Christ is Christmas! We still have the opportunity this Advent, this week, to prepare our hearts for the coming of the Christ Child.

G. Studdert Kennedy served as a British army chaplain in the horrors of trench warfare in World War 1. He has a poem that ends with this stanza: “Should Christ a thousand times in Bethlehem be born, if he’s not born in thy heart, then art thou all forlorn.”

The birth of Jesus, Christ’s coming among us, was, and is a disrupting event.

Plodding along in our lives, God acts in the world, turning the world inside out and upside down.

There is no salvation of the world, there is no rescue and healing, without disruption.

It is Advent, we are on the threshold of the Incarnation. So, get ready to be disrupted! Get ready to be disrupted where it really matters – in your hearts, in your motivations, in the center of your decision-making.

Get ready to be disturbed and disrupted, God is among us, God is on the Way!

The birth of the Christ Child offers up the possibility of salvation – for this Jesus who is named Savior, alone can save us from our sin, from death and destruction, from despair and hopelessness, from poverty and sickness and hunger. Advent is our opportunity to be yet more fully ready for Jesus, the saving one, who will come when we admit and recognize that we cannot save ourselves.

God took the risk, Joseph and Mary took the risk, and Christ was born in Bethlehem.

Are you ready to take the risk of Christmas by welcoming Jesus the Savior into the very heart and center of your life?

Are you ready to allow Jesus be who Jesus is, the Savior of this world and your life?

Are you ready to discover a way forward by allowing Jesus the Lord to disrupt your living in the very deepest and dearest places?

It is Jesus, Jesus the Savior who is and needs to be born and re-born in your life and our lives today and now and always.

Christ is Christmas – be ready to meet and welcome the Savior who is born!

Be ready to be loved, to be inspired, to be disrupted!

Be ready for Christmas, by being ready for the Christ of Christmas!

Be ready for disruption, Jesus the Savior of the world is being born .....

Let us pray - Lord Jesus Christ, in your nativity you took on our humanity, entered our fevered world, and brought us a peace we could not have through our efforts. Come again to us, Lord Jesus, and bring us your peace. Disrupt us in order to birth in us a world we cannot have on our own. Your world, set right, our lives reformed, closer to your image in us, our church, your church, this church amazed by your blessed advent, set free for giving and gracing, serving and following, welcoming and caring, because in you Jesus Christ God is among us. Amen.