

“Nobody Did It”

Matthew 1:18-25

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As I thought about Mary and Joseph this week, I remembered the story of the very important job that needed to be done. It's the one where EVERYBODY was asked to do a certain job. Now ANYBODY could have done this job but NOBODY was willing to do it. Then SOMEBODY got angry about this because it was EVERYBODY'S job to do. Well, EVERYBODY thought that ANYBODY could have done it! But NOBODY realized that EVERYBODY blamed SOMEBODY for not doing the job. Still NOBODY did it. The arguing got worse and finally NOBODY would talk to ANYBODY and EVERYBODY blamed SOMEBODY. What a shame that ANYBODY could have done the job and EVERYBODY could have helped SOMEBODY but yet NOBODY did it!

In fact, nobody is responsible for a lot of things in this world, including a certain famous pre-marital pregnancy. At least that's what Mary was claiming. You see, when she revealed she was pregnant, the first question anybody and everybody, including Joseph, would have asked would have been, “Who is the father?” to which Mary could only have answered, “Nobody.” And she would have answered truthfully since beyond the fact that it wasn't somebody she knew, it wasn't anybody else either since it was a spirit. It was that no-body again, the Holy Spirit, that presence of God that leads us into God's mischief, that helps us to do

the right thing even when it is difficult, that sustains us through all of our uncertainty and all our anxious moments. Certainly Joseph would have had many of those upon discovering that his honor had been compromised by somebody, yet it was a nobody who helped him make Jesus more than just anybody. Let me explain.

In Joseph and Mary's time, the naming of a person had more to do with establishing identity than with labeling. Although in our own time, we often give children names that link them with family traditions, such as using the name of a grandfather, or a favorite aunt, these names are still a lot like other names: they mostly help us sort out who is who. Of course there is significance in naming but in comparison to Jesus' time, our own names are more or less like social security numbers or cedula numbers instead of proclamations of what God has done like in so many of the great Old Testament names. But beyond the meaning of a name, important as that was, the act of naming a child in Jesus' time made them a person, and the person doing the naming also did the claiming, the legitimizing, so to speak, and hence the importance of the angel telling Joseph that he, Joseph, is to name the child "Jesus." The fact of Joseph doing so links Jesus with the great genealogy that begins the Gospel of Matthew, for it is Joseph, not Mary, who is the culmination of the generations beginning with Abraham. Joseph may not be the biological father, but his naming and claiming of Mary's son assures Jesus' place in the ancient story and makes him a somebody, at least in the eyes of those for

whom lineage was important. Not to mention what it did for Mary, getting her off the hook for the work that nobody did.

Apart from the fact that Joseph's courageous act makes Jesus a somebody, it is clear that Matthew is trying to make sure we understand that Jesus wasn't just anybody, and certainly wasn't everybody. It may be uncomfortable to learn that Jesus was not the only character in the ancient world to be reported as having a divine parent and a miraculous conception and birth, but that does nothing to change the fact that it was God's activity, rather than chance or circumstance, that was responsible for Emmanuel, for God being with us. The role of that no-body, the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' conception distinguishes him from everybody else, making him a unique agent of divine revelation to his people. That Mary was a part of this event is, of course, supremely important as it establishes Jesus as a real human being, not just a divine being appearing as a human being, making him again, a somebody, instead of a nobody. Jesus is one of us, a somebody, but at same time, he is not everybody, because if he were, there would have been no need for him, his role in salvation rendered moot by his sameness with all of us. If Jesus were everybody, we'd all be perfect and Jesus would be imperfect.

I've been playing with these words – nobody, anybody, somebody, and everybody – because they hint at the dual themes of body and identity which are so important for Matthew. The more theological buzzword we use for the question of Jesus' body is "incarnation," enfleshment, the embodiment of God in the human

person of Jesus Christ, an embodiment which makes possible the salvation indicated in the name Jesus, which means “God saves.” To quote St. Paul in the fifth chapter of Romans, “Just as one man’s trespass led to condemnation for all, so one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all.” Even though it is the humanity of our own persons and bodies which betrays us, there is something crucial about that same humanity, in the person and body of Jesus, which redeems us. For reasons known only to that great no-body, Jesus’ body is important to God’s purposes and it is this important fact that we celebrate each Advent and Christmas as we welcome not a remote, hidden, and abstract divine force, but a very fragile, vulnerable, and human child who demonstrated in the most wonderful way possible the truth of Emmanuel, that God is with us. As important for Christian theology as the crucifixion of Jesus may be, there is no crucifixion without incarnation. Thank God that nobody did something!

It is then a testimony to how important is this incarnation we celebrate at Advent and Christmas that the Church’s own identity is founded on this very fact. “You are,” the Apostle Paul says, “the body of Christ and individually members of it” a metaphorical statement perhaps, but no less true for being metaphorical. If there is a more divinely inspired description of the church than that it is Christ’s body, it has yet to be revealed to us. And so we too, like Christ, are called to be somebody in this world, not just anybody, and certainly not nobody, but somebody who demonstrates to the world that God is with us still today, that God is present

in, and for the world, despite all the signs which seem to indicate otherwise. Where is God?, people ask, when mothers drown their children. Where is God?, people ask, when a trip to the market in Baghdad is a life and death proposition. Where is God?, people ask, when cancer claims a life long before anticipated. But don't you know that these questions were answered in Bethlehem, when Christ was born? "I am here," God says, through a baby's cries. "I am here," God says, despite all the odds. "I am here," God says, to walk with you, to touch you, to listen to you, and to comfort you, but also to challenge you, and provoke you, and to cause all kinds of divine and wonderful mischief in your lives. Friends, if the incarnation of Jesus Christ is to have any meaning beyond fulfilling a toy retailer's greatest wish, it will be because the body of Christ lives on in every generation to bear the same witness today that God is indeed with us.

Tonight we celebrate the final Sunday of Advent, the season of waiting and expectation. We can celebrate because like children who know there is a gift waiting for us under the tree (because we picked it out ourselves), we are assured of Christ's coming, because we've already experienced it in our hearts and lives. Our time of waiting is symbolic, and joyful, and optional. We already know that God is with us. Yet we are not everybody. You see, there are a lot of somebodies out there whose Advent is neither seasonal, nor festive, nor limited to four weeks in December, but is in fact all too real, and painful, and permanent and obligatory. For a lot of somebodies, their own personal advent lasts years, or decades, or even

a lifetime, the time spent waiting and hoping to experience fully the life God gave them, the time spent until they experience the body of Christ, that symbol that God is with them.

As I thought about Mary and Joseph this week, I remembered the story of the very important job that needed to be done. It's the one where EVERYBODY was asked to do a certain job. Now ANYBODY could have done this job but NOBODY was willing to do it, and EVERYBODY thought that ANYBODY could have done it! But NOBODY realized that EVERYBODY thought SOMEBODY else was doing the job. So NOBODY did it. What a shame that ANYBODY could have done the job and EVERYBODY could have helped SOMEBODY but yet NOBODY did it!

Friends, let's not leave this job to nobody! Let us be the body of Christ in this world, to share the good news with everybody of Emmanuel, that God is with us, in Advent and unto the end of the age. Amen.