4th Sunday of Advent
Sermon 12.21.25

**Matthew 1:18-25**
Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (345)

Aimee Lou Wood made headlines this year. You might have missed that. We had a lot going on. We've made a lot of headlines this year.

Aimee Lou Wood is an English actress. She starred in the most recent iteration of "The White Lotus." A tv show, this lands its audience in each of its three seasons in a fictional resort hotel, the first season in Hawaii, the second in Sicily, and this most recent one in Thailand. Wood plays a sweet character amidst all sorts of spoiled ones. Though a guest in Thailand's richly resourced place, she happily interacting with any and all. But what rapt the world's attention for the brief moment that anything can (hold our attention) is her buck teeth—not buck teeth that belonged only to the character but that belonged first and foremost to the actress.

The world could hardly believe what we were seeing: not only someone on screen whose teeth hadn't been ground down and replaced by full veneers but someone who hadn't even bothered to get braces. Thus came quickly to her the question, why had she never done anything this about this, neither as a normal kid might nor as eventually an aspiring actress almost definitely would.

The interesting thing, though, is that these questions seemed not to come from a place of condemnation but from a place a praise. There was something surprisingly winsome about this very clear accident of the embodied—and her apparent resistance to "correcting" it. There was something downright lovely about this very irregular, asymmetrical particularity. And surely, she'd faced pressure not to be so very particular. Surely, in a world increasingly of Tik-Tok porelessness, she'd gotten the message that this was no okay: she'd never get roles, she'd never get paid. In a world increasingly covered in conformist, convergent AI slop, here was a human face—

and it was beautiful!

It was a mere six weeks ago that we were with Job as he demanded an audience with God. It was a mere month and a half ago that we suffered with Job the showing up of God's overpowering grandeur and frightening sovereignty. This is to say it's been a mere month and a half that we've traveled the theological gamut from God as sublime to God as beautiful, from God as the mighty force behind all creation and amidst all storms and volcanos and outraged oceans and burning suns, to God as a baby—and not just each and every baby but this one, this one baby, Jesus, Jesus of Nazareth; Nazareth, a place that isn't every place but is that place, a small city and wider region; to parents who aren't everyone but are these two people, a girl who was mighty in her own meager right, and a man who was more kind than he was righteousness, in which (kindness) was his righteousness.

The Bible travels this gamut over a far longer span of time than merely six weeks. The books of the Bible come to us from at least a millennium, one thousand years to work through in a standardized, canonized way the myriad ways God shows up to be present to his people, present amidst his creation. When Job so vehemently objects to the way his life has come apart and the insistence of his friends that he has no ground from which to object, he gets what he asks for. He gets an audience with God. But it's not so satisfying an encounter.

It's worth remembering his friends were giving voice to a whole worldview. They were giving voice to the sure conviction that Job deserved what he got—because that's how the world works. People get what they deserve. We all get what we deserve and deserve what we get.

Job, however, knew otherwise because he knew himself and he could see his life as it now had become, and he stood convicted in the discrepancy. He had been good and law-abiding. He had been good and god-fearing. But then his children died and his livestock died and his health failed and he became covered in sores and about all he could manage was to hear his intolerable friends and eventually to speak on his own behalf: "God, get down here."

Similarly, we might spend just a few minutes imagining, just a few minutes considering who seems to be enjoying good fortune in the world and who seems never to catch a break. Call it prayer, this act of imagining; call it repentance, that change of mind that would have us more truly see and know and wisely understand. Then, having done this, we can well come to Job's very conclusion, that something of gross injustice is holding forth here as surely as ultimate justice will one day reign; something of deceptive "no problem-ness" is rolling out here as surely as eternal righteousness as God's aim and God's end will one day hold forth, that ultimate and unending day

that awaits us all beyond time. Redemption: the having worked out of all sin and death, the having worked out of all despair and menace and utter misfortune, that the suffering of this world will have come to nothing. (Don't you just love the future perfect tense?) The terrors and heartbreaks of this world will have come to nothing.

Somehow.

Job's encounter with God doesn't manage (to my reading) to arrive at that place of reassurance. Job's encounter with God as he regards Job is more like, "How dare you?" than "I hear you." What God has to say to Job in Job's indignance is basic theodicy, the vindication of divine goodness and powerful good will, the justification of God's sublime action for all its power and might—the sort of action that should inspire awe bordering on fear, the sort of fierce presence that moves one to wonder bordering on submission. God indeed seems to want submission and silence from Job more than God wants love and embrace.

Job will submit, will be silenced in awe.

For a time.

For a bit.

But he will also insist that his redeemer lives and that at the last he will stand with Job on Job's side. At that last, he will have made himself small enough to stand with Job. Job will have an advocate at his side, though one still powerful enough to bear forth justice. If slowly. If over the long track of time. The pummeling of the wrong can happen quickly. The embrace of the right and righteous, its nurturing and raising up, takes time, takes so much time.

There is something scandalous about how God has revised the coming of his kingdom. There is something of scandal in how God has reworked his coming to the world. Not in something awesome and unmistakable, but in something small and particular, something ordinary and (from a certain perspective) unimpressive. A stable. Some livestock. A manger. Some certain poor shepherds. Eh, I'm not impressed (except that such things have been recast in my own imagining, and I imagine in yours as well).

There's a picture of Jesus that hit the press about twenty years ago. Some authoritative somebody fashioned an image of what Jesus' face might actually have looked like. Brown skin, short black hair and trimmed beard, lacking symmetry, lacking that telling glow, here was the face of an ordinary, weathered, very human man. And some certain Christians freaked out. This face was too ordinary. This face lacked all the signs of holiness. It wasn't sublime. It wasn't glamourous. It bore distinctive features, yes, but not the typical tell-tales signed. It bore distinctive features of

the sort that make each of us distinct from one another, all those commonplace distinctions: my lips are narrower than yours, my hands are bigger than yours, all these commonplace distinctions that make each of us unique but not in such a way that most of us would stand out.

This, though, is very much the point when it comes to Jesus of Nazareth, it seems to me, and the Christian confession following the shepherds' witness that here was the Son of the Most High. This is the point of the incarnation, indeed the scandal of the incarnation. That the God who could make mountains explode and oceans rise up to swallow coastlines and all that is therein, might also become some regular person who has so little to boast of himself or herself. Even the name to be given should read like something of a punchline.

When the pregnancy had shown itself, when Mary was undeniably with child and the unstoppable had begun to grow yet there was no clear acceptable explanation for how this came to be, when Joseph had resolved to do what any righteous man would do, though gently and kindly for he was these things too, an angel appeared to him in a dream and told the story in a different way and to different purpose: that the child was conceived by the Holy Spirit and would be put to purposes of God-with-us. Therefore, he was holy and should be faithfully anticipated while Mary should be warmly held. And when the baby was born, he would be named Jesus.

Which is the punchline.

But you're not laughing, which means the long history of Jesus' accepted holiness has obscured the joke—because in the English-speaking world we've sanctified this name, we've reserved the name "Jesus" for this one alone. But back in the day, in 1st century Nazareth, the name Jesus would have been as ordinary as Steve is for us, or Tim, or Liz or Patricia or Jenny.

Which is how we should hear this pronouncement. "The son of God was born, conceived of the Holy Spirit, filled with the power of the Lord, and named Hank or Linda or Jamaal.

This is the joke on the tv show, "The Good Place." There's a mystery at work in the world it creates. This is an afterlife, but it's not clear whether this is the Good Place or the bad one. And there's a portrait hanging in the office of this place, an oil painting of white guy, mid-20s, early-30s, not an icon by any stretch but certainly an image hung in a place of distinction if also seeming more kitsch than art. "Who's the guy," the program would have us ask. Oh, that's the man who came to understand everything. One day, on a break at work at a strip mall outside of St. Louis (or something like: it's been a long time since I watched the show) he came to an understanding of all things, all mysteries. He had an epiphany, a moment of absolute repentance. See, that's Doug. We honor him now.

Just so, Jesus. An ordinary name for an ordinary man grown of an ordinary baby born of ordinary (if also excruciating) labor—though born also of eternity and light, the creator of the world become a creature of the world that we, in our creatureliness, might become one with our creator.

This is an evergreen scandal. Every age through which the church has journeyed has found new reason to be scandalized by this notion. The scandal for us these days lands amidst the sublime world found on our screens, which has though escaped our screens to step into real life where people go to extreme means to fashion themselves to look like what we see on our screens, this dream-world, this nightmare world, actual humans now fashioning themselves out of their own humanity.

It has its grip on Hollywood and our entertainments. It has its grip on Washington and on our politics. Our politics have come cruelly to embody this hatred of our humanity, the aesthetics of it all not merely about what things look like but what they are or are fashioned to become. It's called in some corners of the internet "Mar-a-Lago Face," named after Donald Trump's Palm Beach resort, Mar-a-Lago. This face: which you see on socialites in South Florida, on influencers of the internet and newscasters of the airwaves, and on members of Trump's cabinet, both female and increasingly male, this which the Trump era has insisted we should all look like so to signify what we're willing to become.

All of which makes an actress with buckteeth seem to a few people out there an early sign of salvation in all of its crooked particularity—and maybe more than a few.

Of course, it's not likely all that many people bring such Christological thinking to their tv watching. That's a pretty specialized point of view. But lots of people can recognize the truth when they see it and can sense its absence when it is indeed absent.

We live in a world where, so massive are our politics, so massive is our culture, made to abstract our actual experience of the wider world, we have become awash in untruth. It's a relatively new luxury, this option we have to divorce ourselves from reality to so great a degree, to deny what is and to insist upon things that are not.

The president's speech the other night, a haranguing of the American people that I didn't tune in for, was apparently a protracted attempt at deception. Through the power of his insisting things are the case we would come to believe that such things are the case. He would get us to share his point of view by intimidating us into submission.

We, though, are people encouraged not to submit but to relate. We are people encouraged by virtue of our faith not to respond to tactics of intimidation but to the appeal of truth and love. We are people like Job was way back in the day, way back even before God seems to have been ready for such people in the world, resisting of sublime power, faithfully waiting rather for true presence. We are people of Jesus—

Jesus who arrives so shockingly real,

Jesus who indeed arrived at the time when Caesar Augustus was emperor and Herod was king of Judea and Quirinius was governor of Syria and Zechariah was the High Priest. Think: these historical markers in the gospel witness of Jesus' birth are to insist to us that our faith is one grounded very much in this world, our faith, however transcendent and aesthetic in its appeal, is but these things for its insistence upon the real, the materially human, the creature made to live and grow and age and die.

It's an astonishing thing, this irreducible assertion at the heart of every Christian confession and every set of practices, every manifestation of the church the world over and its long, bloody history—whether the ornate sort as you see in the sanctuary of St. Stan's in Adams or the plain sort as you see at the Shaker Village in Hancock or here in our sanctuary, which started out plain but which people over the centuries couldn't help but to tinker with. At the heart of it all is that God became one of us that we might become one with him, and he did so through being born as a baby—born in all its risk and pain and labor and astonishing beauty, a baby in all one's commonplace particularities, everyday everywhere a person unlike any other.

This is Christmas, and it's coming.

Thanks be to God.