

Sermon: December 22 - Matthew 1: 18-25 Advent IV
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

A word study isn't generally the snappiest way to begin a sermon, but there's a word in the story of Joseph that's worth unpacking, in this Sunday when we look at the "earthy" story of Joseph and Mary and Jesus and God. It's the Greek word, *Tekton*.

In the lands around Lake Galilee, near where Jesus grew up, there's an abundance of buildings that look just the same: greyish-black brick. If you didn't know better, you'd think it was soot, but in reality it's a volcanic rock called basalt. Nearly everything was built from it – homes, public buildings, even larger furnishings like tables. If you were good at working with basalt, there was work to be had on the various large-scale building projects that the Romans loved to undertake.

In the days of Mary and Joseph, these building projects would have had general labourers doing a bunch of the grunt work, and above that were three main categories of craftsmen. There were smiths, or *Chalkeus*, who fashioned things out of metal; masons, or *Lithologos*, who specialized in stone; and broadly-skilled builders who could work with a bunch of different materials: stone, or wood, or whatever was native to the area. These craftsmen were known as *Tektons*.

According to the Bible, Joseph was a *Tekton*. While virtually every English Bible translation renders this as "carpenter" the reality is that if he was just a carpenter, he wouldn't have been busy enough to earn a living. Scholar James W. Fleming estimates that "Jesus and Joseph would have formed and made nine out of ten projects from stone, either by chiseling or carving the stone or stacking building blocks." While I can't find any source to confirm my suspicion that a mason would have been the expert with a *Tektons* more of a general building tradesman, it's clear that a *Tekton* is one of those people who could build a home from the ground up. This holds a particularly warm spot in my heart, because my Father-in-Law Del, was very much a *Tekton*: stone mason, mechanic, carpenter, craftsman, tinkerer, builder, fixer. It makes me smile to think that Jesus's Dad was a *Tekton*, just like Shannon's Dad.

One day this *Tekton* named Joseph received some unsettling news: his betrothed, Mary, was with child. As an observant Jew, Joseph was required to do something about this, but the choice was his: he could make a big deal about it, find whoever had impregnated her, and have them both put to death... or quietly release her through divorce. Joseph, as a testament to his character, was going to do the latter, kinder option, until a dream-state encounter with an angel guided him in a direction of even greater compassion.

The message Joseph received that night, assured him of two things: Mary hadn't slept with another man, and the child would have a unique and extraordinary connection with the Holy Spirit. The child's designated name, Jeshua/Jesus, "God rescues us", would affirm this. Joseph, convinced by the dream and/or at least willing to suspend his disbelief, agreed to put up with public ridicule, and remain betrothed to Mary. While not exactly the same as an adoption, Joseph's actions would legally establish Jesus as a son of the household of Mary and Joseph... and, by extension, an heir in the family line of King David.

To be sure, parts of this story are shaped to align the earlier writings of the prophet Isaiah, with the early Christian understanding of Jesus as the promised Messiah. But Matthew, writing about 50 years after Jesus' death in an age when there was much friction between Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians, also wanted a way for everyone to hear the Christ story as being "for them." So here, in the first chapter, Matthew spends 17 non-scintillating verses listing the lineage from Abraham to David to Joseph, to show how Jesus fit in with the royal house of David. In the next chapter, the same writer tells the story of the Magi, non-Jewish seekers who came to see this "newborn King." People from every nation and any nation, Jews and Gentiles

alike, are invited to an intimate connection to Jesus, says Matthew. God's love was and is truly for all people, all nations, all religions, all the earth.

While it's not an advised practice to mix and match Matthew and Luke in order to come up with one harmonized story of Jesus' birth, dipping into Luke's familiar story of a trip to Bethlehem for the census, no room in the Inns, a child born amidst livestock and laid in a manger really adds to the "earthiness" of the story of Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

When we were visiting the Land of the Holy One a year and a half ago, we were fortunate to go to the Palestinian Christian village of Taybeh, not too far from Nazareth. In Taybeh, is an intact traditional dwelling, parts of which date to 2000 years ago, other parts about 250 years old. It's called Parable House, and seeing this place helped re-shape our understanding of the Christmas story.

Parable House, like most traditional homes in the area, had a sitting area, an area for food storage and cooking, sleeping quarters in behind the kitchen... and central heating, provided by the animals who bedded down for the night underneath the human living quarters. I had heard for years that our European-based picture of Jesus born in a wooden stable was inaccurate, that animals were more likely to be in a cave than a shed, but seeing this compact home, with animals-dwelling-under-the-main-level, it was so easy to envisage Mary and Joseph and the newborn in those surroundings.

It's not like we had never seen this before – in our summer in the Philippines, the animals often lived under the Nipa nuts out in the countryside – but I somehow had never applied that idea to the middle east. This new picture of how the dwelling fit together makes sense of some nagging questions about the Nativity that have long plagued me. Problem one of my Christmas picture is the idea of an "inn" with numerous guest rooms which really doesn't fit with the times; problem number two, is that virtually everyone in Bethlehem would have been related – especially if they had come for a census based on family lineage, as stated in Luke – so the need to ask innkeepers unrelated to you for a room, doesn't really fit. But the biggest problem, is the idea that hospitality would have been denied, especially to a woman ready to give birth any moment. There was and is such a strong cultural insistence on offering hospitality to any and all, that people already in your home would need to have been packed in like sardines, to refuse a request for shelter.

Imagine instead, this couple showing up at your place – the woman basically nine months pregnant. What would you want to offer them? First off, basic hospitality, a place to sleep and a simple meal. Second, you'd want to give them some privacy, where the midwife could come, soon, and deliver the child. Third, you'd want to put them someplace warm. In a traditional dwelling, the warmest and most private space you would have, would be down there with the animals. Fancy, no, smelly, yes, but secure and private and warm.

One of the great gifts of Christmas, and part of the reason it is such an enduring holiday/holy day, is its "earthiness." The story of Jesus and the everyday household he grew up in, is God's reach-out to bridge the gap between *our* daily lives, and the loving intention of the Divine. The person of Jesus is God's answer our wonderings about what God's holy intention would look like if lived out in a human life. And the way that the gap was closed, and the questions addressed, was in the most earthy, humble ways: in a nation ruled by the unstable household of Herod, under occupation by the Roman empire; with working-class parents far from wealth or privilege; witnessed by distrusted shepherds and outsider magi; within days of birth, having to escape to another land, as is too often the case amongst common folk in our day; and as a child, being raised, not in Athens or Rome or even Jerusalem, but in the rural hill-country of Nazareth. When we imagine all this, as God stepping directly into human life, it wasn't the life of the palace or temple, but the family home of a *Tekton*. And while this particular *Tekton* was

technically of David's royal line, if we do the math, and assume that each of the twenty eight generations between David and Joseph had as few as one or two descendants, we end up with somewhere between 10,000 and 20,000 individuals who would have been just as "royal" as Joseph.

When we recall that the words "human" and "humble" both originate in the word "humus" or "earth," God's intention comes into even clearer view. God was and is and always will be engaged with life as it is actually lived, not a fantasy life we can only aspire to. In those times of life when we've had to decide which bills to paid and which bills to pay the minimum, when we have been on the outside looking in on activities we either couldn't afford or weren't welcome at, or when we have been humiliated – intentionally humbled by others – we have come particularly close to the God who chose to see life from this bottom-up viewpoint. And as mentioned throughout this year's Advent journey of Wind, Fire, Water and Earth, that holy concern for "the least of these" extends to the most vulnerable people and the most vulnerable parts of our planet. Don't for a moment imagine that the Divine consciousness is unaware or unconcerned when species are threatened, when water supplies are poisoned, when microplastics fill the bellies of sea life. Throughout the Christmas story we are shown God's connection with the human, the humble, even the humiliated.

Today we met up with Joseph, last week with Mary, the week before that John the Baptist, the week before the resilient little shoot growing from the stump of Jesse. Each week, we have drawn close to the God we meet in these lives, in the unfolding of our lives, in the ongoing concern we and God share for the plight of the earth. We give thanks for this Advent journey, that has brought us to the very edge of the manger. May the blessings of this holy season, continue to walk this journey with you, and with all the "earthy" ones who seek the companionship of a loving God. Amen.

References cited:

Fleming, James W. – accessed at <https://www.christianpost.com/news/jesus-carpenter-or-stonemason.html>

Wikipedia: "Tekton." <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tekt%C5%8Dn>

*The Ancient Greek noun **tektōn** (τέκτων) is a common term for an artisan/craftsman, in particular a carpenter, wood-worker, mason, builder, teacher, or engineer.*

The term is frequently contrasted with an iron-worker, or smith (χαλκεύς) and the stone-worker or mason (λιθολόγος, λαξευτής)

© 2019 Rev Greg Wooley, Ralph Connor Memorial United Church.