

Matthew 1:18-25

2021 Various: Awkward Christmas

Rev. Jonathan M. Romig / December 19th, 2021

One of the annual traditions of the town I grew up in was to host a day-after-Thanksgiving Day parade, which was really a Christmas parade. Now they call it the “Catch the Glow” parade. There were lots of rides and floats, people marching, colorful Christmas decorations. But every year, at the end of the parade, Santa and his reindeer came parading down the main street. It was Santa, and presents, on a sly, on a semi, with fake reindeer. Rudolf always led the pack.

I have this sort of fuzzy memory of the song Rudolf the Red-nosed reindeer being played and my brother joking about the song (because that’s what we awkward teenage boys do).

*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
Had a very shiny nose
And if you ever saw it
You would even say it glows*

And it starts like a pretty nice song, but then it kind of goes south pretty quickly.

*All of the other reindeer
Used to laugh and call him names
They never let poor Rudolph
Join in any reindeer games*

It’s sort of a mean holiday song! Now we’re talking about bullying and how the majority often picks on those who don’t fit in with the rest? Here’s how it ends. You know it:

*Then one foggy Christmas Eve
Santa came to say
"Rudolph, with your nose so bright
Won't you guide my sleigh tonight?"*

And then suddenly, as if out of nowhere, everyone loves Rudolph!

*Then how the reindeer loved him
As they shouted out with glee
"Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer
You'll go down in history"*

The joke my brother made was that the other reindeer weren’t nice. They didn’t like him, but they accepted him because he did something they wanted. So the message of the song is it’s okay to be different, as long as you do something everyone else likes and you earn their approval. Merry Christmas.

As I reflect on this story, I actually think it’s kind of accurate to the original Christmas story. Rudolph experienced shame, embarrassment, and being a social outcast, and that’s precisely how the first Christmas came about. That’s right, Rudolf and the nativity story share some similarities.

The first Christmas was awkward, embarrassing, shameful.

To highlight the awkward nature of Christmas, I want to look to the birth story in the gospel of Matthew.

Matthew 1:18-19 (ESV)

Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 And her husband Joseph, being a just man and unwilling to put her to shame, resolved to divorce her quietly.

It's easy to miss it in this translation, but the NIV verse 18 says, "This is how the birth of Jesus the Messiah came about." The author Matthew, writing to a primarily Jewish audience, has just finished in the first half of chapter 1, tracing Jesus' royal lineage back to King David and even Abraham, the forefather of the Israelite people. This is big. This is momentous. This is exciting. To identify this as the birth story of the "Messiah"—God's promised rescuer and King is glorious.

But... instead, we're confronted with an unwed pregnancy, divorce, and a vision that might be a delusion. Even though there are shows like *Teen Mom*, which may have done something to normalize young women getting pregnant outside of marriage, unwed pregnancy is still largely taboo in our culture. Now think of a much more conservative culture, where your whole social and economic life was connected to your sexual purity and marriage status, and that's where we find ourselves.

If Mary, a young woman between the ages of 12-14, who is betrothed to Joseph, a young man between 18-19, is found to be pregnant with child before her marriage, there are only two options. 1) She and Joseph got together before they should have, which was shameful. Or 2) She slept with another man, and it wasn't forced because she didn't report it. At least, that might have been how Joseph saw it, and since he knows he didn't get together with Mary, he can only conclude that Mary was willingly unfaithful. There's no way he would have known that the child was from the Holy Spirit.

This is not only profoundly shameful for Mary but Joseph as well. It says something about his character, looks, and ability to provide for Mary. Why couldn't she wait for him? Who is better than him? Maybe these were the kinds of thoughts that were running through his mind even as he wrestled with still loving her. Can you imagine the shame, the disappointment? *The first Christmas was awkward, shameful, embarrassing.*

Brené Brown gave famous Ted Talks on vulnerability and shame. She calls shame "the swampland of the soul." She says guilt is "I did something bad," but shame is, "I am bad." Shame grows exponentially in the petri dish of secrecy, silence, and judgment, but empathy, listening, hearing each other heals shame.¹ What's your shame? Maybe it's something adulterous or scandalous like Mary and Joseph. Perhaps you're ashamed of your parenting or family or anger. Maybe you're ashamed of not being strong enough, or not providing, or not having enough, or eating too many Christmas cookies and Eggnog. I feel all those things. Whatever shame you have, God wants to breathe life into you. God wants to show you empathy through the Holy Spirit and your church listening to you. God showed up for Joseph and Mary, and he will show up for you.

There is grace in the shame.

Joseph must have loved Mary or at least respected her because instead of putting her through the public spectacle of a justified divorce, he decided to divorce her quietly. He tried to preserve her reputation, not to shame her. Joseph modeled grace even in shame. But his grace was far outmatched by God's grace.

Matthew 1:20-21 (ESV)

But as he considered these things, behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream, saying, "Joseph, son of David, do not fear to take Mary as your wife, for that which is conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

Grace is when you're speeding full ahead towards the edge of a cliff and miraculously, supernaturally, find yourself headed in the opposite direction towards life. Grace is when we are headed towards destruction, and

God swoops us up in his loving and compassionate arms. Can you imagine what Joseph must have experienced? He must have tossed and turned with worry and regret, wondering what would happen to his bride-to-be. And finally, when he does fall asleep, an angel appears to him to tell him he's having a son!

Not only might this be one of the first-ever gender-reveal parties, this boy, this son, is from the Holy Spirit. God has given this child to Mary and Joseph, and God has chosen a name for the child, Jesus. The angel tells Joseph, "for he will save his people from their sins." Yeshua, or Jesus, or Joshua in the Old Testament, means "God is salvation" or Yahweh saves. God will turn this shameful adulterous teen pregnancy into the greatest gift humankind has ever known. See how God turned it around? In the darkest moment, God parted the waters and provided a pathway of grace through the shame where there was no way before.

Where do you need grace this Christmas? Where do you feel awkward, embarrassed, or shameful? God has enough grace for you. Maybe you're looking for the best solution possible, trying to turn a loss into a little less of a loss. That's what Joseph was doing. He was doing everything he could humanly do to make a bad situation a little less bad. And maybe that's what you're doing. How can I make a bad situation a little less bad? But what if God wants to be the one to change the situation? What if God wants to show up, and through his grace, and his grace alone, he turns not just your circumstance but the whole trajectory of your life around? What if he wants to transform an awkward or shame-filled Christmas into a grace-filled Christmas? What if God wants to give you hope and joy by forgiving your sins and giving you eternal life?

The first Christmas was awkward, shameful, embarrassing. But there is grace in the shame. Because...

God embraces the shame of Christmas.

Shame is not just saying "I made a mistake" but "I am a mistake." I wonder if that's how Joseph or Mary felt, like mistakes. But what if this was God's plan all along?

Matthew 1:22-23 (ESV)

All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet:

23 "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall call his name Immanuel"

(which means, God with us).

In fulfillment of Isaiah 7:14, God will be birthed into our world, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and placed in a feeding stall for animals, a manger. It's not that God roots for us from the grandstand of heaven, but that God steps into our world and embraces nakedness, weakness, hunger, thirst, tears, and vulnerability. Then one day, he'd do it all over again as he embraces the shame of the cross, becoming naked, weak, hungry, thirsty, crying, and vulnerable to pay the penalty for our sin and grant us eternal life with him. *God embraces the shame of Christmas.* You're not alone in your shame. God is here too.

2021 has been challenging, with social disruption, cultural turmoil, sickness, and even death. But God is with us. God has been here through it all; through your triumphs and fears, God is with us. God embraces the shame of Christmas; God embraces you. Do you feel his arms around you? Do you know his love? If not yet, embrace Jesus, embrace the Christ-child who has become our risen King. God not only embraced the shame of Christmas, he embraced the shame of Easter too, putting himself on a cross to give us life. No one can empathize more with us than Jesus. And as Christians and as the church, we should be the most empathetic people of all, undoing the shame of our world one conversation at a time.

The first Christmas was awkward, shameful, embarrassing. There is grace in the shame. God embraces the shame of Christmas.

So we can embrace the shame of Christmas with grace too.

For Joseph to take Mary as his wife guarantees a lifetime of awkwardness, embarrassment, and ultimately, community shame and ostracization.ⁱⁱ He and Mary and their child Jesus will be social and economic outcasts. Joseph has a choice. Will he walk with God in the shame or go his own way? He chooses humble obedience. He embraces the shame of loving God and believing in His Son.

Matthew 1:24-25 (ESV)

When Joseph woke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him: he took his wife, 25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.

Joseph had the right to name his son, but God even took that from him. Joseph had nothing but faith and obedience, and over his lifetime, he obeys. An angel of the Lord appears to Joseph twice more, once to warn him to flee Herod to Egypt (Matthew 2:13); another that Herod had died and it was safe to return home (Matthew 2:19). But even though Joseph honored God, I think he was always a social outcast. Matthew 13 records Jesus teaching in his hometown of Nazareth and being looked down upon by others.

Matthew 13:54-55a, 57 (ESV)

Coming to his hometown, [Jesus] began teaching the people in their synagogue, and they were amazed. “Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers?” they asked. 55 “Isn’t this the carpenter’s son? Isn’t his mother’s name Mary . . . 57 And they took offense at him.

They didn’t even say Joseph’s name like he was an outcast. They identified Jesus with Mary, never fully identifying Joseph as Jesus’ adoptive father. But a true father is someone who loves his children even at cost to himself, even if it costs him his pride and life. They mocked Mary, “*Isn’t this the manual laborer whose mother, well ... you know?*”ⁱⁱⁱ Joseph and Mary, and God each embraced the shame of Christmas. Will you?

It takes faith to believe in Joseph’s son, Jesus. It takes faith to believe that this tiny baby boy can and has taken away the sin of the world; and that any who believe in him receive eternal life. Our world doesn’t get it. There’s shame in the faith, but we can embrace the shame of Christmas because of the grace of Christ. Jesus embraces us, his church, his people. Let’s embrace him.

The first Christmas was awkward, shameful, embarrassing. There is grace in the shame. God embraces the shame of Christmas. We can embrace the shame of Christmas with grace because God has embraced us.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this sermon at Cornerstone Congregational Church.

Discussion Questions

1. What is one disappointment, failure, or shame from this past year?
2. How does Joseph’s birth story encourage you?
3. What might it look like for you to embrace the shame of Christmas with Jesus?
4. What might it mean for you to show empathy and kindness to those struggling with shame?

ⁱ “Listening to shame | Brené Brown,” TED, March 16, 2012 <https://youtu.be/psN1DORYYV0>.

ⁱⁱ Timothy Keller, *Hidden Christmas: The Surprising Truth Behind the Birth of Christ* (Penguin Books: New York, 2016).

ⁱⁱⁱ Jordan K. Monson, “My Boss Is a Jewish Construction Worker,” *ChristianityToday*, November 22, 2021 <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2021/december/jewish-construction-worker-jesus-vocation-profession-stone.html>.