



**“CORE STORY”**  
**SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 11: 1-6; MATTHEW 3: 1-12**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**December 4, 2016**  
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A 600 page book tells me the story of the Christmas of my dreams in small town Kentucky in 1978. The in-breaking of my Christmas vision emerges from 100s of thin pages crowded with vivid descriptions.

Hopes realized, unmet needs answered, and dreams come true—the template for what the perfect Christmas morning could look like...

The details of that expectant story are woven together in the pages of that important book—The Sears Catalogue—otherwise known as the Wish Book.

The list of things I want include page numbers and item descriptions, carefully laid out on several sheets of paper entitled “Marcia’s Christmas List.”

Listed in order of importance, this year a go-kart is #1.

Christmas morning comes and there is much delight: new pajamas, a new coat, a new set of roller skates with rubber stoppers that match the wheels, and a slinky, but no go-kart.

No matter how many times that go-kart—which eventually turns into a dirt bike and then a moped, gets put on the list, it is never a part of a Christmas morning at the Mount house.

Somehow it curiously was at my friend Amy’s house—but that’s another sermon for another day.

The #1 thing, the core piece of the Christmas story I longed for, never turned out to come true.

Christmas magic wasn’t about getting everything I wanted. No matter how much that big book told me it was.

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The people of Israel had their own book—pages of stories, metaphors, and generations of expectations.

Shoots coming up from dead tree stumps—new life, long-awaited leaders coming from a family tree that had been cut down.

Our oldest faith stories, our oldest tales of what to wish for are crafted from disappointment, from hopes dashed.

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John the Baptist was a man who disturbed the powers that be not just with his predictions, but with his impact.

He fulfilled the expectations of stories passed down. He created expectations of stories that took hold for a future that unfolded well after he was gone.

And he disrupted other stories—the stories of identity, the stories of spiritual entitlement, the stories of what piety and power look like.

John the Baptist was a Jewish prophet, with his own disciples. He makes an abrupt appearance in Matthew's Gospel—a Gospel writer who highly valued fulfilling the expectations of prophecy—of those core stories that shaped the hopes and aspirations of the people of Israel.

John ate locusts and honey—an obvious sign that he was not from polite society. He ate what the poor who lived in the desert ate.

And while ritual washings were typical in Jewish practice, John riffed on that with a radical turn. No more repeated ritual cleansings—John's baptism was a once and for all sacrament of repentance.

He was a descendent of devout and royal priests. He emerges from the wilderness a radically alienated man, a man with no patience for hypocrisy, a man uncompromising in his call for integrity in the life of faith.

John rejects the narrative of chosenness. Repentance and its fruits are necessary to prepare the way for the Lord. What we do matters. How we live matters. He tells those with formal power in the world of institutionalized religion: "You are not safe." "You are not covered." "You are accountable for your actions."

Not the man of our dreams, I venture to say.

Prophets like John the Baptist were a threat to the social system of his time—a system built on the exploitation of the peasant class by the aristocracy. John the Baptist was a threat to political stability. His message of social justice led to his arrest, his imprisonment, and his execution.

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John the Baptist told anyone who would listen to get ready—for the one who would come after him—a man with the power to blow our cover—to tell us what really matters and tell us who we really are.

But Jesus didn't look a whole lot like the person John the Baptist described—someone methodically separating the wheat from the chaff and burning what didn't make the cut with unquenchable fire.

And Jesus didn't exactly satisfy the prophetic expectation that the bloodline of David would be restored. Jesus, Matthew tells us at the very beginning, is connected to the Davidic line not by blood, but by Joseph's adoption of him.

That same genealogy catalogues the women who have held the Davidic line together—in unconventional, unplanned, troubling, and sometimes questionable ways.

Seduction, prostitution, adultery, and maybe even sexual assault knit together this bloodline of kings. Our salvation story doesn't always develop the way we expect it to.

Mary was in trouble. And Joseph struggled with what to do—what was the right thing in this fraught situation?

God told Joseph to do the same thing God was doing—stand with a woman and a child who were imperiled, to bring legitimacy to their illegitimacy. God doesn't just decide to salvage a complicated situation, this is God's well-crafted story and intention—Jesus' illegitimacy is the ultimate element of this story—Joseph takes as his son and as his wife people who others would reject. It is because Jesus was born this way, not in spite of it, that he has the power to transform the world.

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During Advent we wait expectantly and we are called away from the places and the stories that usually tell us how to wait and what to want. God does not call us to the feet of the righteous when God calls us to the stable in Bethlehem. God calls us to the feet of the illegitimate, the troubling, those who we scorn and shame for their indiscretions, those to whom we consider ourselves superior.

God legitimates the illegitimate and this turns our world, our stories, and our expectations upside down. This legitimation of the illegitimate comes to us when we thought we had our futures wrapped up in our expectations, in our theologies, in our institutions. Just like Mary and Joseph thought they did—they were betrothed, they thought they were secure in their futures, they thought they knew what waited for them. But it wasn't.

This may sound like bad news rather than good news for some of us—after all, we consider ourselves the legitimate ones lots of the time—we are mainstream society, we are normal, we are on the right track. We set the terms for what is acceptable theologically, morally, and ethically. But what we may think is our ticket to the

promised land, to getting just what we want, may be what is keeping us from truly receiving the mysterious promise of God with us right here, right now.

Let us not be afraid to ask ourselves how the things we hope for may keep us from seeing what God is actually doing in our midst.

In our misplaced comfort, in our distorted narratives and expectations, we, too, are rendered illegitimate. God frees us up to stand with the illegitimate only when we realize that we, too, are illegitimate.

As Soren Kierkegaard said: Jesus is an offense. Do we have room for such an affront to our sensitivities on our Christmas wish list?

God calls us to wait for the coming of Christ surrounded by those we try to avoid, those we have dismissed as “out there,” “inappropriate” or even “crazy.”

The Incarnation comes to us in a place many would call questionable—with an adopted child called to restore a bloodline of kings; a mother in trouble called to consecrate the way God gestates in each of us; and man who was uncomfortable with the whole situation but who stood with Mary and Jesus anyway.

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Is Jesus really what we want for Christmas? He isn't the kind of king we are use to imagining—he is a king who doesn't throw his weight around, or use dominance to keep us in line. He doesn't use his riches to make things go his way.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is our core story—this is the story that defines and prepares us. It is a story that offends and upends, a story that forms and transforms.

(At the table) A story that invites you and me to come closer to a life-changing truth about ourselves—it is in our most chilling vulnerability that Jesus meets us with the promise of new life emerging—from an old dead stump of a family tree cut down generations ago, from a wilderness man who tells us things we don't want to hear about ourselves, and from questionable circumstances that most people would say are beyond the pale, God births something altogether startling and full of just what we need

This is our story—a joyful feast where there is enough, there is room, there is hard truth that heals and reveals, where we remember another story of disappointment and questionable circumstances, and where we taste and see anew a love that will never let us go.

Thanks be to God.