

Don't Should on Yourself

December 31, 2017 Luke 2:22-40 Roger Barkley

Last week I spoke about the scandal of God announcing the birth of the Messiah to shepherds.

In those times, shepherds were at the very bottom of the social ladder, classified as sinners right along with prostitutes.

They were held with such suspicion and contempt that many villages enacted ordinances prohibiting them from even entering town.

God *should* have announced the birth of the long-awaited Messiah to the Temple priests.

And the Messiah certainly should not have been born to a dirt-poor family huddled on the floor of a barn.

What's up with that family, anyway?

They didn't have the wealth or status that would have shown God's blessing upon them.

There's no record of Joseph teaching in the synagogue back home in Nazareth, plus there were salacious whispers about Mary being pregnant.

It shouldn't have happened this way, which Luke further reminds of us in today's passage.

As faithful Jews, Mary and Joseph presented their son for dedication and circumcision, but all they brought as a Temple sacrifice was a pair of doves.

That was the bare minimum required sacrifice, but a more respectable family would have not slighted the priests with the bare minimum – not for such an important occasion as a first-born son.

Important people would have brought more doves and pigeons, and maybe even a lamb or two.

The Messiah shouldn't have been born this way.

But God's blessings seldom show up through "shoulds".

I want to tell you a little about my dad.

My dad's been gone for more than thirty years now, but he spent his sixty-some years feeling like a disappointment and failure.

My mother often reminded me about how my dad would start some interest or hobby, but then as soon as he got good he'd drop the ball and go off and start something new.

We all came to the depressing conclusion that my dad didn't have the stick-to-itiveness he should have had, so we joined him in thinking that he never achieved anything worthwhile.

I know that my dad was a crack shot with rifle; he competed in the California championships.

Maybe that's what led him to gunsmithing – he created some beautiful rifles.

When I was young, he and I used to make fishing flies – and his were good enough for him to sell.

Then he got interested in crafting silver jewelry.

He bought a bunch of tools and set up a workroom and did a pretty good job.

My mother said that he should have stuck with that and made us some money.

Instead, he got interested in ceramics ... we had more than one kiln through the years.

That led him to pottery.

His potter's wheel took up a lot of space, especially annoying after he lost interest.

When I was eight, he singlehandedly designed and then built the addition of two rooms to our house.

We lived up in the mountains, and the new wing of our little house jutted out and over some larger boulders ... really quite a feat.

The room additions allowed him to then brew beer in the cool under our house.

He added these two rooms because we needed the space after my brother was born.

And by the way, he delivered my brother right there in the bedroom we had all shared.

The doctor later joked about the unusual knot he tied in the umbilical cord, but my baby brother was just fine.

At the time, we had several acres of farm with everything from cows to chickens.

He cared for all of those and even butchered our pigs from a big branch of an oak tree.

He tinkered with painting – mostly modern oils – and then sculpturing.

His very first sculpture, chipped from a block of granite, was pictured in a national art magazine.

He later said that he really should have stuck with that because he could have been somebody.

But after his initial success he lost interest in sculpturing and instead built a canoe, which led him to build a small sailing craft.

He sailed a couple of times, but then somehow got into building dulcimers.

They must have been pretty good because he got more orders than he could keep up with.

That's when he retired, moved to England and started writing a history of their seaside village in Devon.

He was also a rabid reader and a bit of an expert on James Joyce.

And by the way, he could bake breads, sew clothes, and cook like a world class chef.

Throughout all those years, he worked as a forest ranger and a fireman – which are pretty manly professions.

He even led a hotshot crew that parachuted into distant fires.

But he always told himself that this was not how his life should be – that he'd dabbled here and there but never really made a success of anything.

He endlessly belittled himself for being a fireman instead of an academic – like a professor or a librarian (although we did house the community library in the back room of our garage).

And because he saw himself that way, we all fell in line and believed him too, sharing his anger, disappointment and depression.

Anger, hopelessness and depression hung over our family like the London fog.

But with the distance of thirty-some years, I've begun to see my dad as someone quite different than he'd been able to see himself.

He was a Renaissance man who experienced a huge range of interests and experiences.

But tragically, he had “shoulded” shame upon himself instead of embracing his fascinating life.

I've been thinking of my dad a lot recently and realizing how many “shoulds” I carry around in myself.

I sometimes berate myself over books I *should* read, goals I *should* have, people I *should* have loved more, what I *should* be doing in my spare time.

While I'm riding my bike, I tell myself that I should be riding faster and riding more hills.

Riding harder is good, but then I worry that I should be home doing more weights.

While I'm relaxing with a John Grisham novel, I'm telling myself that I should be finishing that book on cosmology that I started.

You get the picture ... it never ends.

It may be that behind all those "shoulds" is a hidden assumption that if I don't keep pushing myself with that demanding "should" voice that I'll become lazy, unproductive and uncaring.

It may be that many of us harbor a hidden assumption that we are somehow flawed, and without the pressure of our "shoulds" that we will falter.

I also have a lot of "shoulds" for other people, too – a judgmental voice that's quick to point out where they are falling short of who should be.

But every one of those "shoulds" – either for myself or others – closes me to enjoying the blessing of what I do have, of those around me are, and of the pleasures of what I am doing right now.

Maybe my New Year's resolution this year could be something about not "shoulding" so much, but just being alive, awake and receptive in each moment and for each person.

That was a lesson that popped out for me as I read of Jesus' birth.

We all have assumptions about what life should be, about whom we should value, and about whom God values.

Socially, this has led to the rejection and persecution of entire classes of people, and individually it has given us tunnel vision, blinding us to many of the joys and opportunities right in front of us.

But the genealogies of Matthew and Luke remind us that God works through all sorts of people and circumstances.

Modern readers have little idea of the significance of genealogies in biblical times.

There are about twenty-five of them in the Bible, and they are less concerned with historical accuracy than explaining something about character and pedigree of the descendent.

So, no one would be concerned that Matthew and Luke's genealogies of Jesus vary in some detail ... but they might have been shocked about who is included.

A famous line from the movie *Forest Gump* says, "Momma always said life was like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get."

But the genealogies show how God can bless every one of those people.

God can draw a straight line, even with a crooked stick.

And we can, too.

So, what do the genealogies say about Jesus?

Matthew 1:6 *And David was the father of Solomon by the wife of Uriah....*

Everyone expected the Messiah to be of the family of King David, but the gospel makes a point of showing that his lineage dates back to the abuse of Bathsheba.

If this had happened today, Bathsheba would have been tweeting about her abuse at #metoo

Matthew's genealogy goes on to include four Gentiles, something unexpected for the Jewish Messiah: Tamar and Rahab were Canaanites, Ruth a Moabite and Bathsheba was probably a Hittite.

That may have been scandalous – not how it “should” be – but it turned out to be incorporated in God's plan for Jesus being the Jewish Messiah for all nations.

So, in Matthew, Jesus' male lineage is Jewish all the way back to Abraham, but gentile women added credibility for his Kingship of all nations.

And these women were not just gentiles.

Remember that Rahab was a prostitute, and Tamar pretended to be a prostitute in order to seduce her father in law.

Matthew's genealogy is a slap in the face to any pretense of the purity of ancestors as they "should" be.

God is at work in unexpected places ... even where we diverge from the expected.

The heavy voice of our "shoulds" can deafen us to Spirit's presence in all those moments, people and diversions.

May you allow yourself in this coming year to awaken to Spirit's voice as you silence some of your "should" voices.