

## **James and Jude, Signs and Portents**

*Isaiah 8:11-18; Mark 6:1-6*

We will start the new year looking at the holy family from the standpoint of Jesus' little brother James. One of the facts we marvel at every Christmas is that God's eternally begotten Son became one of us in the ordinary fashion. He was the eldest child of young, mother, the stepchild of a journeyman carpenter, whose family was in duress on the night of his birth, so he first lay in a feedbox in a stable, and like most young families, Joseph and Mary made their ascent from there, setting up for business in Bethlehem, only to be astounded by magi from faraway bearing gifts and then persecuted by Judea's mad old king. So the story of Jesus' childhood wound through Egypt and then back to Nazareth where the angel Gabriel had set the story in motion.

And Jesus' life story was full of paradox, rude ordinary facts of life, a feedbox in a stable, interwoven with singing angels ablaze in the night sky, a small family carpentry shop in Bethlehem capitalized by astrologers from Babylon, the crown prince of the universe one of five brothers and who knows how many sisters born all over the landscape, one in Bethlehem, more in Egypt and still more born in Nazareth, that dusty, backwater village tucked into the Galilean hills.

And the point of all this paradox is that God always meant to save humanity from all our oversize, melodramatic, unsolvable problems through the ordinary mechanism of a father-mother-sister-brother family. By which I mean to say that we will never do better with God than we do with the parents who brought us into the world, the brothers and sisters who were our rivals for attention and affection, the spouses whom we promised to love, and the children whom we welcomed and nurtured and tried to teach a way of life. It is the love we share with parents and siblings and spouses and children that tells the story of where we stand and whether we walk with God.

Some seven hundred years before Christ, the prophet Isaiah was confronted by a society where everything ordinary had gone by the wayside. God's people had tired of the love and forgiveness and perseverance it takes to bind fallen individuals together in family, and together with God on a straight and narrow path through all the chaos and folly that sin evokes in our own hearts and relationships and in all the world around us. And Isaiah chose to confront the chaos by going home and making a brood of children for he and his wife to raise. He said, "*Behold, I and the children the LORD has given me are signs and portents in Israel!*"

Isaiah calls the children of believing parents “*signs and portents*” because the very act of promising to love a spouse all your days and daring to bring children into the world and welcoming and nurturing and teaching them to believe in God and respect themselves and to love others, all involves a measure of faith that often won’t seem possible in a fallen world. We take on a task that we ought to know is beyond our reach unless God was there to help and guide and bless us.

It’s beyond our reach! And God doesn’t set these standards, God didn’t ordain these covenants to impose shame and despair on us when we can’t make them work. The Bible is full stores about saints who were both faithful and who sometimes failed to make marriages work, and sometimes failed to pass on their faith to the children they welcomed and nurtured and taught the best they could, Moses, Samuel, David, Solomon, Hezekiah and... Joseph and Mary.

We will hear in the next few weeks the story of James and Jude, Jesus’ younger brothers who didn’t believe and didn’t understand Jesus for all the years he made disciples and taught a gospel in Galilee. In the struggles of his earthly ministry, Jesus’s brothers were not with him. Next week, we’ll see that Jesus’ whole family struggled to make hide or tail of what God had called him to be and do.

And before the month is out we’ll see that God can redeem and breathe life into people and circumstances and relationships that seem hard to reach and impossible to fix, ordinary and tedious. It’s important because the villagers in Nazareth had God the Son speak in their synagogue and all they could see was the ordinary boy they never managed to really know.