

Sermon, *Hitting the Brakes on Christmas*
The Very Rev. David J. Marshall, All Angels 12.22.24

There is an eighteen-year-old driver named Sam who lived through the most stressful car ride of his life. He was driving his mom's mini-SUV near Fargo North Dakota at night on a country road. The car suddenly started to accelerate without him pushing on the pedal. He tried braking, turning off the car, taking it out of gear – none of that worked. It's a newer model that has electronic systems that do not allow the driver to disable the vehicle while it's in motion. Yet, with a stuck accelerator, there was nothing he could do but steer... and use his phone. He called 911 and rapidly explained to them that he can't stop. Luckily there was a county officer nearby who responded. By this point, the mini-SUV was going at its top speed: 113 mph. The officer had to drive faster than he'd ever driven just to catch up (140 mph, reportedly). If you look this story up online, you'll see a surveillance video of this young man flying through a small country town with a posted speed limit of 25 mph.

The officer talked to dispatch who tried contacting the manufacturer to find out how to disable the vehicle. Unfortunately, seven miles ahead of this speeding duo was a 45 mph turn. The officer did not want to watch this driver lose control and end up crashing. Here is what they came up with: if the accident alarm system went off in the SUV, it would take the car out of gear. The officer floored it, drove past Sam, and pulled directly in front of him. He told the young driver to rear end him square on. Sam agreed and then the officer hit the brakes. The SUV rear-ended the patrol car, the alarm system activated, and the car went into neutral. The officer put both feet on the brake pedal and stood on the brakes to bring both cars to a complete stop.

What an experience that must have been.

I bring this up because for some, Christmas feels like a car with a stuck accelerator – no matter what you try to do, the car, or in this case, Christmas, is not stopping for anything. I just lit the fourth candle of Advent; there is no fifth Sunday; Christmas is almost here. It's like a mini-SUV going 113 mph through a rural North Dakota town. For those of us that feel this way, we need someone to pull in front of us to put the brakes on this season. And, for others, we are the one applying the brakes so that someone else can pause and have peace this holiday season.

Speaking of applying the brakes, did you read the NY Times article by Nicholas Kristof and his interview with author Elaine Pagels? In the interview, Pagels talked about her new book, Signs and Wonders, where she wrote this: *We realize that some of the most compelling details of Jesus's life are explanations his disciples created to paper over inconvenient facts. Jesus wasn't illegitimate, his mother conceived by God. ... These necessary fabrications were the very details and promises that electrified their listeners and helped his followers' numbers grow.*

I disagree. This theology and reading of history feels to me like an SUV going 113 mph. It's going to flip over and roll unless someone gets out in front of it and applies the brakes. So let me accelerate up to 140 mph and we'll see what happens.

The author, Elaine Pagels is a professor of religion at Princeton. She has written seven books, three of which I have on my shelf. As far as religious history writing is concerned, she's the most

widely read author that I have found. If you have read *The Gnostic Gospels*, *The Origin of Satan*, or *Reading Judas*, you've read her work. I'm just a barrier island priest, so criticizing her work does not come easy to me; but, again, I'd like to get out ahead of this one.

Professor Pagels believes Mark's Gospel was the first one written. (As a refresher, the four canonical [biblical] Gospels are Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) She believes that Matthew was written to correct; or "paper-over"; what Mark got wrong or left out. She also believes that Luke was written to correct Matthew. The underling belief here is the first one written is the most accurate. The longer one goes on in time, the more fabricated, or elaborate, the stories get. Again, I disagree with that belief so stay tuned for another paragraph. Pagels wrote that when Matthew and Luke set out to revise Mark, each added an elaborate birth story – two stories that differ in almost every way. Matthew introduces Joseph, the adopted father and Luke introduces the Angel Gabriel who astonished Mary with what is now called the virgin birth.

I disagree with the premise that Mark was corrected by the other two. Think of it this way, if you and I were to set out and write a history book on George Washington, would we use the same stories we've already heard or would we seek out nuances and other parts of his life and incorporate that into our book. I think Mark was writing what others had forgotten about. In other words, everyone in the community of believers knew about Jesus's extraordinary birth and his also extraordinary resurrection and ascension into heaven. It's what everyone was talking about. Mark, however, steps in and tells us about what Jesus taught and what he did. He reminds us about how the disciples (who, later as apostles, were amazing and like super-humans) got it wrong often. Jesus forgave them and continued in his shared ministry with them. Mark was telling us parts of Jesus's story that we may have forgotten over time. (And thank God he did) Along those lines, Matthew's community knew other stories about Jesus – probably about Mary – so he wanted to tell the story about Joseph and the resurrection narrative too. Luke, from what just about every historian and theologian believes, was hired to write a Gospel of Jesus. Unlike the communities of Mark and Matthew, Luke didn't walk with Jesus (he most likely walked with St. Paul). Many believe Luke talked with Mary and recorded her story – which is why the Magnificat, and the story of Elizabeth, are only found in his retelling.

The second part of my disagreement comes from circulation and persecution. Once Matthew and Luke were written, scribes continued to copy Mark and circulate his Gospel. If it was an embarrassment, yesterday's news, or something to be papered over, why did they continue to circulate it. When the persecutions came, it was illegal to carry Christian writings (including Mark). Yet, the believers back then held on to them, copied and circulated Mark as well as the other writings.

The third part has to do with the council of Nicaea and other such related councils. Around the year 327, when the Creed was written, the canonized books of the New Testament were assembled and arranged. Instead of taking Mark/Matthew/Luke and making one story; like what happened with the Book of Genesis; they decided to keep them intact and separate. Again, I don't see a paper-overing of history here. Likewise, during the Reformation, the reformed Church could have removed Mark, or combined the stories together, but the Church didn't.

During the season of Advent, I have been talking with you about the inseparability of doubt and faith – you can't have one true faith without having doubt. I appreciate what Pagels is doing. She is doubting some of the most fundamental aspects of our faith tradition and of the New Testament. If she didn't challenge them, would we even know they were there to be challenged. Our religious tradition enjoys a good argument from time to time. It keeps us sharp on our belief and in our practice of forgiveness and joy and peace. Mark was telling us the same thing happened with Jesus – his disciples got it wrong, a lot, and yet he stuck with them. We should stick with one another too.

Christmas is almost here. If you believe in the Church teachings of the miracle of the birth, or if you have doubts, you are welcome here. In particular, if life is going way too fast, like an SUV going 113 mph without the ability to stop, try rear-ended our faith tradition so it can slow you down to a stop so that you can find peace. Like a fortified police cruiser with a well-trained and compassionate patrol officer, our faith tradition can take the speed in which critics, or doubters, or sceptics travel, it can take being rear-ended so to bring you peace. Lastly, miracles and mysteries – the foundation of our faith in Christ – are unknowable and unprovable. Just like professor Pagels cannot prove Matthew and Luke were correcting, and paper-overing the realities of Jesus's birth, we cannot prove she's wrong. We have to accept one another, slow down for a while and ponder some of life's, and our faith's, greatest mysteries, and have peace and joy in our shared communion with one another.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.