

Sunday, December 24, 2023

Christmas Eve

Luke 2.1-20

The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

Service Live Streamed at:

<https://www.facebook.com/stgregoryslongbeach/videos/323724430481404>

(Sermon begins at about 55:35)

“Icon of Hope”

What is the quintessential image of what we celebrate this night? The image that captures, as much as is possible, what this night is all about. While the answer varies by individual, there is a high probability that most would say it was the creche, depicting the moments following Jesus’ birth. You have to admit, the creche does have it all. The newborn Jesus lying in a manger under the watchful and protective gaze of Mary and Joseph; surrounded by various animals, such as cows, sheep, and oxen; all attracting the attention of shepherds, who have heard from an angel: “I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” As much as any image, the creche is a depiction of what would by all accounts be considered a “Kodak moment.”

Although truth be told, the real scene of what happened with the birth of Jesus was probably far from a Kodak moment. What we see depicted in nativity scenes is really an idealized, sanitized version that is far removed from reality. In actuality, the scene would have not been quite so lovely. In fact, it was probably pretty disgusting. This was a stable, after all. The place where animals ate, slept, and, well, performed other bodily functions. A dirt floor, strewn with filthy straw and waste—from the resident animals, as well as the birth that had just occurred. The manger in which the baby was laid was nowhere near sanitary, being the feeding trough for animals. Rather than brightly lit, the stable would have been dark and dingy. If Mary and Joseph were even lucky enough to have light in their makeshift accommodations, it would have been a small oil lamp, at best. And while not a feature of nativity scenes, the smell would have probably been pretty overwhelming. All in all, a far cry from the labor and delivery unit at Long Beach Memorial.

The 20th century Italian essayist Giovanni Papini once wrote:

Jesus was born in a stable, a real stable, not the bright, airy portico which Christian painters have created for the Son of David, as if ashamed that their God should have lain in poverty and dirt. And no the modern Christmas Eve “holy stable” either, made of plaster of Paris, with little candy-like statuettes, the holy stable clean and prettily painted with a neat, tidy manger, an ecstatic ass, a contrite ox, and angels fluttering their wreaths on the roof—this is not the stable where Jesus was born.¹

Like so much of our interpretations of Scripture and of religion, the scene surrounding the birth of our Lord, the birth of the Son of God, has been domesticated to make it more palatable to our modern sensibilities. But at what cost? To what purpose?

To that end, Papini goes on to observe, “It was not by chance that Christ was born in a stable. What is the world but an immense stable where men produce filth and wallow in it?”² While Papini’s comment may contain a bit of a pessimistic view of the world and a harsh impression of humanity, there is some truth in what he says. It is not by chance that the Christ Child was born in a stable. It is not by chance that he spent his first hours of life in such squalid conditions that were barely fit for beast, let alone for a newborn baby, human or divine. Which raises the question, why was the Son of God, the One we believe to actually be God-in-the-flesh, born in such lowly, impoverished conditions anyway?

Before we answer that question, there is another which precedes it. First is the question as to why God chose to be so vulnerable as to eschew his omnipotence and take on a life as a mortal human being? And then, once we answer that question, why choose to enter that mortal human life under the conditions he did?

The answer to the first question—why God, after untold ages came in the flesh to live among us—is pretty simple. Just look at the Old Testament. The Old Testament, the story of our history as God’s people, is at its core the story of God seeking to be in relationship with his people. With us. From the very beginning of the creation of humanity, God has wanted nothing more than to be in relationship with us. That’s why he created us. To be his companions. To be co-creators with him. And right off the bat, we rebelled and did not follow his laws. The entire story that follows is of God seeking to be in relationship. Of God seeking to woo us, as it were. Sometimes using the carrot, sometimes using the stick. After a period of punishment, or after a period of us feeling abandoned—which was really our own doing—we would repent and return to God. God would welcome us back with open arms. And things would go along great. For about five minutes, until we messed up again. And then the whole process would start over again. Right relationship, rebellion, requital, repentance, repeat.

Of course, part of the problem was that we humans just have a really hard time being in relationship with an entity that we cannot readily see or touch, that seems out there somewhere. Which is why we had a hard time keeping on-track in our relationship with God. Long distance relationships don’t work very well. Out of sight, out of mind.

But God came up with a solution. A radical solution that would forever change who God is and how God relates to his people. What if God were to come to be with us, in the flesh? To provide that face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh connection that we humans need. What if God were to come to live life as one of us? Not just to be with us in the flesh, but to actually experience life as we do. All of it. The joys and the sorrows, the ups and the downs, the pleasure and the pain. To experience all stages of human development, from birth to death and everything in between. Allowing God the firsthand experience of what our lives are truly like.

So out of profound love for us, out of that overriding desire to be with us and to know us on such a deep and intimate level, God chose to make himself vulnerable and became human. Enter Jesus. Emmanuel. God with us. God in the flesh. Born, just as we all are.

Which begins to give us an insight into the answer to the second question: why be born in such lowly, impoverished conditions? We know from Scripture that God does not do anything

without good reason. God could have chosen to have his Son born in the most opulent of conditions—into circumstances befitting not only a king but befitting the King of kings. And yet, that was not the case. In this exercise of vulnerability and humility, God was all in. He was not going to take the easy route. If he was going to come among us, he was going to do so in a way that allowed him to experience not only the best of what humanity has to offer, but also some of the worse. And probably because the vast majority of people, then, as now, experienced more of the worst humanity has to offer and less of the best. The impoverished, oppressive conditions into which Jesus was born, being closer to representing the reality of the majority. The reality reflected by the actual conditions of Jesus' birth, not the idealized, stylized creche.

And God's choosing to come among us in such conditions is completely consistent with who God is. Throughout the Old Testament we see that God has always had a preference for care of the poor and marginalized, for the sick and infirmed, for the widowed and orphaned. For those who society is so quick to cast aside if not outright ignore. God chose to be born into circumstances that would allow him to truly experience what those he is most concerned with experience. To be in solidarity with them. And to be in solidarity with all of us who carry our own experiences of being separated, of being hurt, of being marginalized.

As the 20th century monastic Thomas Merton beautifully put it:

Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it—because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it—his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are regarded as weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, and are tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world. He is mysteriously present in those for whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.³

“For whom there seems to be nothing but the world at its worst.” Seems. Because in his coming to be with us, God through Jesus did not just come to experience what we experience. He also came to be a light shining in the darkness of our broken and hurting world. To be a light shining in the darkness of our broken and hurting lives. To show us a better way. To provide a message of hope that all is not lost. That our God has not abandoned us, but truly is with us and for us.

Even in our own time, when we face the equivalent of the ills and woes that plagued the world at the time Jesus was born. Even as we face political unrest in our own land. Even as we must contend with rapidly increasing impacts due to climate change. Even as we continue to recover from the ongoing effects of a global pandemic. Even as we struggle with increased homelessness on the streets of our city. Even as watch the rights of our fellow citizens being systematically stripped away. Even as we watch wars being waged in multiple areas of the globe, including a war in the land of our Savior's birth—complete with the cancellation of public Christmas celebrations in Bethlehem. Even in the midst of all this and so much more, including our own personal concerns—particularly in the midst of all of this—what we celebrate this night is an even more important reminder that the hope born 2,000 years ago in Bethlehem continues. As evidenced by the fact that we are here celebrating the most significant event in

the history of the world—God coming to us in the flesh. As we come together to celebrate the most extravagant demonstration of God’s love for us.

What we see in the nativity scene may be a sanitized version of what really happened on the night of Jesus’ birth. But this idealized version is no less true. It is a reflection, an icon, of the hope that this birth holds for humanity. Even 2,000 years later, as our world continues to struggle with and experience many of the same conditions that were present at Jesus’ birth, the nativity scene, representing what we celebrate this night, continues to be a sign of hope. It continues to give us hope. Hope that the current reality is but a manmade aberration in God’s divine vision. That the One lying in a manger in Bethlehem is indeed our God, come in the flesh to be with us, out of love for us. Providing us with the hope, with the promise, that the light of his love, radiating from that manger, will overcome the darkness.

Merry Christmas!

¹ Giovanni Papini, “The Real Stable,” Plough, December 17, 2023.
https://www.plough.com/en/topics/culture/holidays/christmas-readings/the-real-stable?utm_source=Plough+-+English&utm_campaign=f3d98c9da4-Dig&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_4cbb94afa4-f3d98c9da4-295405801.

² Ibid.

³ Thomas Merton, “Daily Dig: Into This Demented Inn” email from Plough, November 27, 2021.