

Come to the Manger

From the beginning of time God has offered light and life. And yet because we are so familiar with this story, its truth may not really engage us anymore. We know, that young Mary gives birth to a baby in a Stable (which was actually most likely a cave) and the child is placed in a feeding trough. We don't know whether Joseph was able to find a midwife to assist in the birth. We do know that they took shelter with the animals because there was "no vacancy" for them anywhere else in town.

We know that Bethlehem was full of visitors because the Emperor Augustus had decreed a census and because people were counted in their town of birth Joseph and Mary travelled to Bethlehem. I wonder, with all of that being said do we remember this is a story of oppression. Of tyrants forcing people to make impossible journeys and Kings wanting to kill this child.

We may dress it up with tinsel, Christmas trees, poinsettias, shining stars ceramic nativities and angels but it is a story of oppression and vulnerability, of injustice with little mercy. I want to break the Christmas spirit we are in, but the reality is it looked only vaguely like the visions we see today. First of all. I have given birth and I can tell you that I looked nothing like the fresh, pristine Mary we usually see sitting in our Nativity scenes. I doubt she looked anything like that either - especially considering she had also just completed a six day journey through treacherous terrain and then gave birth without any sort of drugs in a cave surrounded by animals. Then there's the totally composed Joseph,— holding a lantern or a large stick. I doubt it. And then the baby Jesus, usually looking about 6 months old with blond hair and blue eyes. Again, nothing like the original story.

“If our manger scenes were realistic, Mary would be recovering from a painful labor full of sweat and blood, with a look on her face that's anything but serene. And Joseph — wouldn't he be a nervous wreck, too? His hand too shaky to hold a lantern? And about that newborn. Shouldn't he be red-faced and screaming? Eyes clenched closed and wisps of hair stuck to the top of a head that's still odd-shaped from all the squeezing?”

We have sanitized and romanticized it. We've removed all the blood and sweat and tears and pain and goo. It's no longer something real. We've left out all the messy parts. The oh-my-God-what-now parts. The I'm-screaming-as-loud-as-I-can-

because-it-really-hurts parts. The oh-no-I've-stepped-in-the-animal-droppings parts. The *real* parts.

Our manger scenes depict a far different story than ones written 2,000 years ago. Those old stories tell of a young couple that's been disgraced by questions about the baby's father. The grand moment comes in a place nobody would choose to bring a baby into the world."¹

The hope is that as we tell it we notice the mercy, the love, the generosity the wonder of God with us. The hope is we, notice the welcome of strangers and outcasts. From the very birth of Jesus the unwelcomeable are welcomed. Shepherds were the first to journey to the child. Dirty, stinky, unwashed herders of livestock existing at the margins, rejected by religious authorities because they did not keep the purity laws of the day. Outcasts of society were the first of the faithful to see Emmanuel. It's the Christian story of God meeting the most vulnerable first.

And it doesn't stop there. In fact this baby grows up to be the kind of "man who hangs out with all the unsavory folks in his society. The ones that the religiously observant people call sinners. Poor people. Dirty people. Rough people. All sorts of social and economic outcasts. He even turns fishermen ... into his closest friends and followers."²

Back at the nativity in Matthew's Gospel, wise men, come to see the child. People of considerable resources and learning, international travellers who know the stars. They all come even from other nations, other religions, other cultures. No matter where they came from they were welcomed. The point of the Christmas story is not the religious beliefs or cultures of the people but rather that they came to meet God. Everyone does not have to have the same belief and practice and yet the core of our faith tells us that we all can look to this Child for light and peace and welcome. And if we all chose to live as this child our world will be abundant in hope, peace, joy and love.

We may come and worship the Child who was born in Bethlehem two thousand years ago, the Child who shows us what is at the heart of every child, every man, every woman. But it is not to an ancient story that we bow. For the Child is in our midst right now, in every bright and dark place of the world we find Emmanuel.

¹<http://sojo.net/blogs/2014/12/15/why-are-manger-scenes-so-weird>

² IBID

Joe Kay wrote “It’s not about a calm-faced mother and a lantern-toting dad with a perfect baby stretching out its arms to the world. It’s about us as we really are. Bleeding and screaming. Covered in goo and disgrace. Aware of our many failings and falling-short moments. Coming apart. Barely holding it together. Unable to explain why we make such bad choices so many times.” It’s about us. You and Me! Because really, we are the ones in this moment who are invited to the manger. We are the ones who understand how hard life can be. We know the blood, sweat and tears of living.

This story is for you and me, just as it was for the herders of sheep. Don’t be confused by the pristine Nativities we see adorning our mantels. This is the place to bring your messy lives and discover grace.

That is what Christmas is about. As we acknowledge our brokenness, God responds with grace and reminds us that no matter who we are, what we have done, or where we have journeyed we are welcomed to the stable. We are loved beyond measure.

“So go ahead. Take your place in the manger scene. You belong there. In fact, offer to hold the baby for a while and maybe even take him for a walk. His parents will be grateful for the break. It’s been a long night...But you already knew that, didn’t you?”

May you come to know the Christ Child as close as your very souls and live into the story of life and light and holy welcome for all the world. The question is not where will we find God. For God is everywhere. The question is whether we will visit the manger and open our hearts to God’s loving welcome for all. May we come to Emmanuel with open hearts this night.

Amen.