

### **Come to the Manger Again**

I love the Christmas story for so many reasons. Its beautiful, its magical, its powerful and it is so familiar, its easy to miss the truth of it. We know, that a teenage mom 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. Even with the familiar I have just stated did you notice this is a story of chaos, and fear, and oppression? Its a story of tyrants forcing people to make impossible journeys and a King wanting to kill this child. The time and place in which Jesus was born was dangerous, filled with political upheaval. Life would have been hard for common folk.

We may dress it up with tinsel, Christmas trees, poinsettias, shining stars ceramic nativities and angels but truly it is a story of oppression and vulnerability, of injustice with little mercy. I don't 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 and I was in the hospital with the best of care. I doubt she looked anything like that either - especially considering she had just completed a six day journey through treacherous terrain and then gave birth without any sort of drugs in a cave surrounded by animals. And lets talk about the totally composed Joseph,— holding a lantern or a large stick. I doubt it. He was likely stressed beyond belief. And then in our chichi the baby Jesus, usually looks about 6 months old with blond hair and blue eyes. I'm pretty sure that babe looks nothing like the one in the original story.

I love the carol Silent Night and my favourite part of every Christmas service is when we dim the lights and pass the candles and sing into the night. Still, it was likely not a silent night. "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."<sup>1</sup>

And when we pretty up the story we miss the point the hope is that at Christmas we will 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, loving, welcoming, celebrating with 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."<sup>2</sup>

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 Christmas story is not about religious beliefs or cultures, but rather it is about those who noticed, and then journeyed no matter how hard towards a place where that they came to meet God. Its an incarnation story, a story of God with us, but not just us, with all of creation. We don't 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 chose to live 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 an ancient story to which we bow. For the Child is in our midst right now, in every bright and dark place of the world we find emmanuel.

This nativity story is about us just as we are. We are welcomed to this holy place in spite of our failings and falling-short moments. Even if we are barely holding it together, unable to explain why we make such bad choices." It's about us. You and Me! Because really, we are the ones in

---

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

<sup>2</sup> IBID

this moment who are invited to the manger. Yes you, who understands how hard life can be are invited in. 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. May we come to emmanuel with open hearts this night.

Amen.