

Incarnation: the Manger

Luke 2:1-7

Dec. 16 2018 (Pageant Sunday)

So, it's a bit of a mess up here right now –
there's hay all over the floor, and it smells like a stable.
Our sexton, Jim Zalenski, was planning to clean like crazy between the
services today,
to get the church tidy for the 10:30 congregants –
but I actually told him not to clean.
I wanted the hay just where it is,
and the smell just what it is.
And I wanted the manger left right there,
right where our altar usually is.

Because I wanted us, the 10:30 crowd, to spend some time at the manger
today.

That's what we did at 9:00, of course,
at our annual Christmas pageant.

Up here in the hay,
we had young Evan Snyder as Joseph
and Susanna Toothaker as Mary
and their baby Jesus,
surrounded by shepherds and angels and wise men AND women,
all worshiping at the manger.

And I wanted us at this service to do the same.
Just to spend some time at the manger.
Contemplating the manger.

Most every year, David and I get up to New Haven to the Knights of
Columbus museum,

where they have a collection of beautifully crafted nativity scenes,
from all over the world –
with mangers delicately carved from fine woods,
or porcelain with jewels embedded.

Our manger is not that.
It is not crafted from fine woods.
It was crafted from perfectly sensible inexpensive woods
long long ago by a church member, but I don't know who --
it's been in the basement of this Church ever since I came to this church.
So it's gotten some water damage,
and it has a few screws loose.
But don't we all.
And it's the wobbliness of it and decrepitude of it that I love.

In case you're worrying now,
let me assure you that we don't ever actually put our baby Jesus in this
manger.
The baby Jesuses in our pageant are a real babies,
and, believe me, they're freaked out enough by being held by a stranger
and surrounded by small children in donkey costumes –
they don't need to be put into a pile of straw on top of all that.
Except for the year my daughter was Jesus –
26 years ago now.
I forgot to tell the girl playing Mary that year that she should just hang onto
the baby –
and so instead, when Brigitta was brought up to her on stage,
Mary – with great care -- placed her in the hay in this old manger and left
her lying there the rest of the pageant.

Well, why not?
That's exactly what Mary did, of course.

Have you ever read, or seen the movie version of,
The Best Christmas Pageant Ever?

If you haven't, in a nutshell, it's about a church Christmas pageant that kind of goes off the rails, for all kinds of reasons.

And in one scene, the girl playing Mary – who is not particularly familiar with the Bible story – looks at the pageant director aghast and says

“What? You want me to stick the baby in a feeding trough?”

“It's not a feeding trough!” says the director. “It's a manger!”

“Looks like a feeding trough to me,” says Mary,

and of course she's right.

There was nothing elegant about the place that Jesus was born; hay and old wood and mess – just like we've got up here right now – that's what it was.

I had Liam read the Gospel of Luke chapter two to us just now, just to remind us of what is at the heart of the Christmas story: Jesus, yes, in a feeding trough.

Jesus born in a very messy, very smelly, very real stable.

And God choosing to enter this world in this way.

Skipping over the palaces of kings,

detouring around the homes of the wealthy,

going right by the garrisons of generals and the places of power –

and instead finding a dirty stable

and a wobbly feeding trough.

God, born a baby, God, born poor,

in a place of filth, really.

God, Creator, choosing this manger

as the doorway into our world.

I think that's the whole point.

I think, more than angels and shepherds,

more than stars and gifts,

more than Wise Men and Herod and Gabriel,
this manger is the whole point of the story,
this feeding trough of a crib is the whole point.

Because this not-so-great place to put a kid is here to remind us
that of all the places God could have chosen to show up,
God chose a place that was utterly inglorious --
in a stable behind a hotel where there were no rooms for the likes of Mary
and Joseph.

That of all the ways God could have entered our world,
God decided to do it like this.
God was born into the world in as unideal a spot as you can imagine.
Jesus arrived in the midst of chaos.
This is where God chose to be.
This where God chooses to be.

And I don't know about you, but I find that tremendously reassuring.
Because chaos is kind of where I live.

I mean that, first, on the most literal level.
If you stop by the Parsonage this afternoon –
and I'm not suggesting that's a good idea –
but if you did,
you would find yes, a Christmas tree that is up – I get points for that,
and yes, has lights on it – again, more points,
but next to it is a stack of boxes with our ornaments in them,
and that stack of boxes has been there for going on three weeks now.
At this rate, we may decorate the tree AFTER Christmas, when things are
calmer.
And there's the advent calendar I showed to the kids in church two weeks
ago.

Yesterday I realized that two weeks ago was the last time I'd done anything with it.

And I know that a lot of people hide their presents for others in their closet,

but if you open my closet, you'll find – well, shoes.

Because I'm not exactly on top of the gift purchasing thing ...

And by not on top, I mean, really *nothing*.

I've got time this Tuesday where my goal is to purchase everything in one four-hour period.

You get the drift. It's chaos.

So thank God for the manger.

Thank God for a manger that reminds us that God is no stranger to human chaos and mess.

Because that's exactly where Jesus is at home: in lives not made perfect, in the unready and the messy, in the real.

And it is into our very real, less-than-perfect lives that Jesus wants to be welcomed.

I found a prayer for Advent the other day that I thought was pretty, and thought of using today:

“O God, sweep clean the rooms of our hearts,” it said, “and make them ready for our Savior.”

But, nah, I thought:

Jesus doesn't want us to wait until we've cleaned things out and made things perfect:

Jesus walks into our lives just as they are, just as we are, and makes himself at home in our messy imperfections.

Maybe the prayer should be more like,

O God, help us open our hearts to the Savior and not worry about how messy they are.

And now, of course, I'm talking about so much more than whether Christmas decorations are up.

I'm not talking about what our homes look like.

Now I'm talking about our lives, our selves, the people that we are.

Our lives can get pretty messy.

We are so often so very far from perfect.

In varying degrees on varying days,
of course,

but Lord knows we are all works in progress.

Just this week, I was talking with church friend Heath Smith about an author we both enjoy, Anne Lamott.

If you've been in this church a while, you've heard me speak of her before.

Way back when, probably twenty years ago now,

she wrote a memoir telling the story of her remarkable, quirky journey to faith.

'Traveling Mercies', it was called.

Anne Lamott as a young woman was a brilliant but perennially unemployed writer.

She was also an alcoholic, and struggling with an eating disorder to boot.

And living alone, because there was no one who wanted to live with her.

And she writes about one Sunday morning

when she is wandering down the street, pretty miserable, and she hears music coming out of a church.

And it's lovely. And so she creeps into the back of the church just to hear the music.

But she leaves before the preaching starts;

that she doesn't want to hear.

And she does this Sunday after Sunday;

she stops in to hear the music, and leaves.

But something is starting to work on her.

Someone is starting to work on her.

And then comes one night on her own, a particularly bad night, when she is overwhelmed with despondency, filled with self-loathing.

And she curls up in a corner of her dirty little apartment to sleep it off.

Here's how she wrote it:

“After a while, as I lay there, I became aware of someone with me, hunkered down in the corner.

The feeling was so strong that I actually turned on the light for a moment to make sure no one was there – of course, there wasn't.

But after a while, in the dark again, I knew beyond any doubt that it was Jesus.

I felt him as surely as I feel my dog lying nearby as I write this.

I felt him just sitting there on his haunches in the corner of my room, watching me with patience and love,

and I squinched my eyes shut,

but that didn't help because it wasn't my eyes that I was seeing him with.”

And that was it.

once Anne Lamott realized that Jesus had entered into her life, even *her* life, in all its chaos,

that was it.

And that church that she'd kept scooting out of early each week became her home, her safe place, her base to build on.

These are the lives into which Jesus walks.

These are our lives, into which Jesus has been sent.

These are the not-beautiful places in our lives into which Jesus is born; the mangers, the mess.

Each of us with our quirks and needs, longings and empty places, imperfections and messes.

These are the lives where Jesus is at home.

Lives lived in this very real, quite imperfect world: that very world in which Jesus was born.

Jesus is at home in a world where people don't have it all figured out, in a *world* that doesn't have it figured out.

The Jesus who was born in a stable,
laid down to sleep in a feeding trough,
this Jesus is absolutely at home
in a world of utter imperfection and frequent chaos,
in a world that hasn't gotten its act together.

This is where he makes his home:
in our unready, unfinished, unideal, absolutely needy world.
Jesus is most alive in our needs and imperfections;
his light shines most clearly through our broken places;
his love is known most deeply in our longings.
And Jesus is the one at work among us and with us
healing and creating hope
for each one of us and for all of us together.

So in these next days,
delight in all that is good and true and wonderful,
celebrate all that is just right and beautiful and joyous,
but know also with certainty
that it is not just **those** places that Jesus inhabits;
that he dwells with us, in patience and love and understanding and hope
in *every* place we live.
He is the God of the manger. Amen.