



SERMONS THAT WORK

Christmas Day Selection II

A Beautiful Mess

[RCL]: Isaiah 62:6-12; Psalm 97; Titus 3:4-7; Luke 2:(1-7)8-20

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant, O come ye, O come ye to Bethlehem; come, and behold him, born the King of angels; O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, O come, let us adore him, Christ the Lord. Amen.

Each Christmas, we hear that well-known story from Luke 2. It's the one about a young couple, a man named Joseph and Mary, his expectant wife-to-be, doing their civic duty to be registered in Bethlehem, in the region of Judea. With the whole known world to partake in Caesar Augustus' registration, the couple too feels compelled, and so they pick up from Nazareth to trek roughly 100 miles back to Joseph's hometown.

Sometime along the way, Mary, great with child, starts to feel contractions, sending the couple to scramble for lodging, traveling from house to house, knocking on doors, looking for a place, any place. After being sent away time and time again, a manger suggests itself to the couple as a suitable crib. The child is born and quickly wrapped in bands of swaddling cloth. According to Luke's account, there was relatively little fanfare, at least at first – just an exhausted mother, a stupefied father, and the promised newborn.

Then, there are the angels—one at first, announcing the birth to some shepherds, and then a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace.” The angels disappear and with haste, the shepherds make the trip to see this strange “thing” that has come to pass.

Each year, we are invited into that scene, and each year, the story sounds at least a little bit different. Forgotten details emerge and we again remember the Nativity in a new way. We might wonder about the precise wingspan of an angel or the dimensions of the manger. We might consider what exactly that makeshift labor-and-delivery room looked like or try to imagine the varied sounds of love that drifted into the expanse of that night.

One of the deep beauties of this narrative is that it can bear all these wonderings and then some. The Christmas story is one pregnant with joy and promise, life and pain. It encompasses all these aspects of

human life, because, at its heart, it is a birth story, and birth stories are messy. Birth stories drip with and are driven by peculiar memories, curious details, and complex emotions.

There are cars that break down on the way to the hospital and children born in cars that break down on the way to the hospital. There is the penitential scratchiness of a hospital gown; the stringent smell of hand sanitizer; a flurry of telephone calls; and the constant beep of the infant heart monitor. There are hours of pain and crying and screaming and laughing. Bodies, both professional and personal, pop in and out of the room, interrupted and even silenced by those still, unfiltered moments of marveling at new life.

This is the beautiful mess of birth. This is what the Church invites us into year after year. We are invited to allow the sweat to sting our eyes as we journey shoulder-to-shoulder with the Holy Family, to feel the soft, packed hay underfoot. We are invited to smell the sheep out in the fields and to be afraid at that angelic announcement. This is when we let all those details wash over us, when we find ourselves caught up in the mysterious story of God's salvation. And we're called to lean into the deep hope, the joy and promise, that this new birth brings.

The messiness of the Nativity meets us in the messiness of our lives. There is work and school and family. There is grief and loss and disbelief. There are feelings of excruciating shame and immense joy. For so many of us, the challenge of the season is that many of these feelings are bound up together: all the excitement and expectation bundled with a sadness, a sense that even when that glorious morning appears, that person will not be there, opening gifts, eating breakfast casserole, and drinking far too much coffee alongside us. And that is hard. That is hard because we want wholeness. We long for things to be set aright.

But notice that none of these feelings is lost on the Christmas story. For each season in which anxiety hovers, there is Joseph, trying to anticipate what his friends and family will think of this bizarre situation. For every instance of shame, there is Mary, the pregnant, unmarried teenager, shunned by the very people her son came to save. For each glimmer of hope, there are the shepherds, hurriedly traveling to Bethlehem to see their newborn king. Indeed, for every moment of unabated joy, there are the heavenly choirs piercing the darkness of that deep, purple night.

The good news of the Nativity is that the mess of our lives is not lost on the Nativity. There is an honesty, a profound humanity, that radiates from the lines of Luke 2—the eternal God of the universe, unbound by time and space, saw fit to break into our world in a particular time and place, with all the politics and social stigma and anxiety. God saw fit to come among us in the most unsuspecting way imaginable: in the form of a tiny, cooing, utterly dependent baby.

The strange beauty that breaks forth from such a counterintuitive advent might catch us a bit off-guard. We might be tempted to tamp down the difficulty that dots our days. For those of us who experience grief and loss this season—whose memories are strained and tenuous—the tendency might be to rearrange the furniture of our lives to match the grandeur of our heavenly guest. Or, for those of us cognizant of the

habits that close us off from others, there might be the desire to try and ready our souls for the one coming into our midst.

But the Christmas story, at just about every turn, is about overturning such a notion. It's not about how God withheld love until the world was pristine enough for God to enter into it. It's about love incarnate, enfleshed, dirty and dusty and bloody, and all for the sake of what's dirty and dusty and bloody.

God comes in the mess: a living, breathing word of peace to a people exiled from their homes and their hearts. The sound and shape of that word can take on a variety of tenors and tones over the course of our lives. At Christmas, though, we are reminded that this word often sounds a lot like the cry of a newborn, a timeless cry from a mouth that is only hours old. Can you hear it amid the noise of the world? Can you make it out from among the screams of your own regret and self-doubt? Can you hear it?

Come to Bethlehem and see him whose birth the angels sing; come, adore on bended knee Christ the Lord, the new-born King.

Hasten to the manger and you will find something so purely human, so perfectly lovely, it must be of God. Amen.

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