

Christ Mass
Luke 2:1-20
December 24th & 25th, 2018
The Rev. John Forman

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see-- 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. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

When I was a kid, my family had a creche set. All molded out of industrial strength hard plastic: Mary and Joseph, three shepherds and a few of their sheep, three kings – Caspar, Melchior and Balthasar – and Balthasar's servant. A camel, naturally, a donkey and a cow. Two of the shepherds wore what looked like miniskirts and, except for King Balthasar and his servant (who were black), everyone looked vaguely Welsh. Or maybe Flemish.

Every year, my mother carefully arranged them on the same bookshelf, each in their *one* correct position. The kings started out on the fireplace mantel, of course, because they would obviously be on the road until Epiphany. Caspar was apparently the more pious of the three kings because every year he heroically made his way along on his knees. Well, either that, or he had no lower legs. Being made out of hollow plastic, it was hard to tell.

Baby Jesus was molded into the manger, forever bonded to the straw, and my mother kept him hidden away in a drawer until Christmas morning. Wouldn't be right to have him out too early. And so, all through Advent, we

had the rather odd scene of two men in dresses with some farm animals standing around a man and a woman who were kneeling in utter fascination with some Invisible Attraction on a bookshelf.

One year, Mom did put down some timothy hay from the guinea pig's cage. Even so, Joseph and Mary just stared at who-knows-what for weeks on end with my Dad's entire set of Edward Gibbon's "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire" and a row of Hemingway novels behind them.

And yet, as goofy as all that was, that plastic creche was one of my favorite parts of Advent and Christmas.

Many years later, my folks bought themselves a new set and gave the old one to Jennifer and me. We already had a creche that we liked and so we gave the old one to our daughters. Calling it their "activity set" (they *still* do), they happily added it to their other treasures and played with it year-round.

When Advent came around, they set up *their own* vision of the nativity. Most of it you would recognize immediately, but at some point, the Holy Family and all the expected guests would be joined by a stuffed bison, a Lego kid on a bike, a rainbow unicorn or any number of other exotic creatures and people. Some were friendly giants and others were perilously tiny, especially when rubber sharks or some of the larger bears made appearances.

The scene they devised became wildly eccentric. In one sense, none of it was accurate. And yet, in another real sense, what our daughters did with their "activity set" expressed the mystery of the incarnation almost perfectly. Without reasoning it out, they played out a simple child's version of the same thing that adults do in more complex ways.

They made connections between the birth of a unique child of God and their own unique lives.

As adults, we do well to bring all the aspects of our one and only lives to the manger scene – all the funky, joyous, frustrating, heart-warming, secret and unconcealed aspects of our lives – we can bring *all* these and more to this tender scene.

When we do that, those unique, personal details become our own stuffed bison or Barbie dolls or bath-tub squid that no one else would ever *dream* of placing around the Holy Family. Precisely *because* they are so particular and personal, they are also often the facets of our lives that are most true about us. And God welcomes them with all-embracing love.

Cards, movies and plays tend to portray Joseph and Mary, his pregnant fiancé, walking in the snow with a donkey from hotel to hotel where no one has room for them, until they happen upon a barn where Mary gives birth.

And yet, there were no “hotels” in first century Middle Eastern villages.

What’s more, Luke’s Gospel says that Joseph was a direct descendant of the house of David. Some say Mary’s family was also connected to the royal family. And so, for anyone in “the city of David called Bethlehem” to turn away David’s descendants would be as unimaginable as a Kennedy showing up in Boston or someone from the house of Kardashian driving around Los Angeles only to have hotels turn them away time and time again.

The Greek word that we heard in Luke’s Gospel translated as “inn” refers to one of the only two rooms found in most homes in Bethlehem. It was often the room at the end of the house highest up a hillside or up on the roof. And so, it came to be called “the upper room” and it was intended for guests.

There was no room in the “inn,” the upper guest room, for Mary and Joseph because it was already full of guests who had come to be registered.

The second, *lower* room was where the immediate family cooked, ate and slept. Working people brought their livestock, their *livelihood*, into the lowest part of the house, just beneath the family room to keep them safe and to provide warmth. They cut small troughs into the stone positioned at edge of the living space just above the animals. A bit of fresh hay made for crude but cozy bassinets that allowed the babies to be surrounded by the rest of the family sleeping on their own straw mats.

And *that’s* the scene the shepherds came upon. The honor of the entire community was on display. And what the shepherds found was a baby wrapped in the same way they wrapped their own newly born, in the arms of a loving family in an ordinary peasant home. Anything less and the honor code would have compelled the shepherds to take the baby to a proper home.

And so, from a historical and cultural perspective, little of what we imagine about the birth of Jesus is accurate. Hallmark doesn’t have it right. My mother didn’t have it right. My children didn’t have it right. Not factually anyway.

Mercifully, the incarnation is not about historical accuracy. Not really. No, instead, the incarnation is a truth that bursts all limits of history and

culture. In fact, no human explanation or experience will ever contain it all, even though *we all* live and breathe and move in the reality of the incarnation.

And so, anything that feeds our hearts by allowing us to see real connections between our own lives and the mystery of the incarnation will contain at least some truth. Each uniquely personal way of making sense of the mystery is gathered into a truth that unites us, like raindrops falling into a vast ocean.

The nativity of Jesus is a unifying focal point for a reality beyond all our comprehension. Our interpretations are simply starting points from which we can find our way deeper into God's love. And so, in a gorgeous array of differences, Christ is born once again in each of us this (evening/morning).

There is a church in Nazareth called the Basilica of the Annunciation. The church stands over a stone grotto – little more than a cave really – that tradition says was Mary's childhood home and the place where the Archangel Gabriel gave God's invitation to Mary; and where she granted her consent.

The result of Mary's consent is carved in Latin across the façade over the triple-door entrance into the basilica: "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us." *That's* the unfathomable mystery of the incarnation.

The church walls and courtyard also feature an amazing variety of culturally specific visions of the nativity; of Mary and the Christ-child or of the Holy Family. Some are painted, some are mosaics and some are sculpted.

Each image was donated by people from different parts of the world. And so there are images of Mary and Jesus that look Korean or Thai, some show them wearing traditional Filipina clothing or kimonos. Salvadorian, Maltese, Ukrainian and Ethiopian images of Mother and Child are displayed among images from Scotland, Indonesia and Egypt.

Not a *one* of them is historically accurate and yet (although I never saw a single Lego kid or stuffed penguin), every one of them radiates with devotion and with reverence and love; all connecting the universal with the particular.

And that's exactly what we do here this morning. We gather together with all our specific misinterpretations and insights; all our personal fears and hopes; our intimate disappointments and dreams. We bring our most devoted love and our most painful grief.

We come with all that is true *about us* and *for us*, and we give it all to the presence of the mystery of the Word made flesh, as vulnerable as candles flickering in the darkness.

And God, this morning, fills us with something good and pure and beautiful. The astonishing gift of God's joy and comfort and peace and unending love – the Word made flesh given once again to dwell among us and within us.

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