

Rev. Philip Blackwell • Christmas Eve, December 24, 2015
Text: Luke 2:1-20



First United
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

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The crèche on the altar; “crèche,” Old French for “crib.” Here is the iconic family scene of mother, father, and infant, but in this instance, not just any infant, but the baby Jesus whom we acknowledge as the Son of God.

There are other nativity portrayals in other places, perhaps at home . . . perhaps the one from China fashioned out of bamboo that sits on the table in the living room, the straw one from Austria, worn after all of these years with one of the angel’s wings missing, but on the mantel, just the same, the little one from Guatemala on the bookshelf where we open the doors to the farm shed and discover Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus nestled inside.

Some of us will never be a mother; some of us will never be a father. But we all have been a child, and so we look at this depiction of the baby Jesus and understand that all of the world, all of humanity, lies here before us tonight.

We might add other figures to the tableau . . . a mangy shepherd or two, with a couple of little lambs, three foreigners trudging in from the East, maybe with camels in tow, an angel up on the roof of the stable, singing away. There are other crèche scenes where over the years people have added characters important to them . . . Obi Wan Kenobi, a Barbie doll, a Packer fan with a wedge of cheese on his head. Yes, all of the world meets at the baby’s crib tonight!

But our veneration is not tied to the physical object itself, the scene with the baby Jesus at the center. It is only a representation of God’s truth. In a church I served years ago the congregation traditionally placed a nativity scene in the entryway to the education wing of the building. It was a rather unpleasant looking combination of a milky-white plastic Mary and Joseph, each about two and a half feet tall, kneeling around a milky-white plastic Jesus lying in the milky-white plastic “straw.” All of the figures had light bulbs surgically implanted in them so that they would shine. Each weekday morning as I sat in my office with the door open I could hear the nursery school children enter the building with their parents and walk past the crèche. One day I heard what I had never heard before. A four-year old voice saying in panic, “Look, Mommy, Jesus is melting!” I hurried out into the hallway, and the child was right. There was Jesus puddling on the floor.

We cannot be fixated on the figures in our nativity scene. Even the alive Jesus did not stay an infant. No, he did not melt, but he grew to become a prophet who left behind the manger in order to change the world, and we gather tonight still to talk about it, and wonder about it, and to thank God for it because through him God has changed our lives, too. In a scene so simple, so down-to-earth, so homely, God has called us to lift up our eyes to the heavens and see all that is majestic about our lives.

In our day-to-day lives we tend not to see the majesty. We live in a flat world that is anything but transcendent. We cannot look up when we are tweeting, when we are texting, when we are chasing hashtags and scrolling through Facebook. As more digital platforms give us more to do, our world tends to shrink.

It is designed that way. It is not a lack of willpower that keeps us mired in an electronic swamp. There is a reason Netflix autoplays the next episode of a TV series within ten seconds, why Evite demands our instant reply, why T-Mobile has introduced BingeOn, to which we can subscribe to receive constant streaming of video channels. Millions of dollars are spent to keep us from looking up, to prevent any sense of self-transcendence. It is like the slot machines at the casinos, says Natasha Schull, a professor at New York University with whom I have met around the social impact of gambling addiction. Psychologists have designed them to keep us in our seats all day, forgetting about eating and everything else, making us feel the rush of winning when we actually are losing all that we have.

In our flat world where we are conditioned always to look down, the down-to-earth portrayal of Jesus’ birth cries out to us to look up, to see that star in the sky, to hear the angels singing, to see the shepherds trudging downhill from the ridge above, to reclaim a sense of wonder over the very gift of life itself, even with its pains, its disappointments, its challenges, and its defeats.

The star, singular for the purpose of our story . . . Martin Luther was a good theologian but not a very sophisticated astronomer. He suggested that God somehow turned on and off the Christmas star in order to guide the magi to the crèche, a kind of primordial GPS. It worked pretty well, though they were off by about nine miles, arriving at Herod's palace rather than the stable behind the inn. That chance meeting with Herod soon would lead to murderous complications.

Last week I visited with a friend, Grace Wolf-Chase, who is an astrobiologist at the Adler Planetarium in Chicago. She is much better with stars than Martin Luther; she also is pretty good with theology as a Lutheran laywoman who teaches classes in religion and science. She showed me a photograph of our solar system, stars of every size and intensity, over 400 billion of them in our galaxy, many with their own planets circling around them, with an estimate that 25% of the planets have characteristics that might support life. The grandeur of it all! May the one star of our manger scene that shines just above the rooftop turn our gaze heavenward to see the transcendent splendor of our creator. And this infant lying in a manger calls to us to look beyond ourselves to the wonder that is all around us.

The manger scene itself is unimpressive. Maybe Joseph assured Mary all along the way, "Don't worry, we can stay with relatives." Great idea that was! So, they stopped at the one overnight accommodation in town. But, Luke tells us, there was no room for the Holy Family in the inn. That may have been just as well. We are prone toward imagining a mean-spirited innkeeper showing them the "no occupancy" sign while other overnight guests are laughing and socializing in the lobby bar before heading upstairs to their rooms with a queen-size bed, a coffee-maker, and a walk-in shower. But this most likely was an inn only in that it provided inside protection from the elements for travelers on their way to somewhere else, most likely all of them sleeping on the floor of a single large room, along with some of their smaller animals. Imagine giving birth in a room full of strangers who were exhausted and craving sleep. No, out back in the stable would do just fine. Mary and Joseph would have the privacy they need without having to apologize for the commotion of childbirth, and certainly the animals around them would understand fully. They could use the feedbox of a donkey for the crèche, the crib.

So down-to-earth . . . and if just for the moment of this evening, we could see the richness of life, the glory of the simple, the majesty of the commonplace. This scene of essential simplicity reveals the power of a transcendent God who destroys political power with the cry of an infant, who invalidates religious conceit with a prophetic voice which calls all presuppositions into question, who champions equality by lifting up the poor and knocking the rich down a peg or two, who embraces the natural world by making this marvelous birth part of nature . . . the pain and relief of the natural process, the need for fabric in which to wrap the infant, the cooing and hee-hawing and neighing and bleating of the animals all around, they being the first witnesses to God appearing in our midst in such a human way. Time stands still, if just for a moment, and heaven and earth are one.

In the morning the sun will rise on Mary and Joseph and Jesus, and life will go on. In Luke's version after eight days Jesus is circumcised, given a name, and presented to God in the temple in Jerusalem by Joseph and Mary, they offering a pair of turtle doves in celebration of his birth. Then, it is back home up north in Nazareth.

Matthew tells a very different exit story. The magi come and honor the infant Jesus with three gifts, but the secret is out; Herod is looking furiously for this challenger to the throne, as tiny and helpless as he is, and he will murder every infant boy in sight to save his regime. Joseph hears a warning in the night and before daybreak, the three of them are on their way to Egypt, refugees escaping tyranny.

But all of that is a story for another day. Tonight, just for this moment, as we fix our gaze upon Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, may we see above all else what is important in life, this life, our life, what is bigger-than-life in what we experience. And may our hearts and voices find joy in it. Tomorrow the sun also rises on us, and we will enter a broad daylight world that will look familiar to us. But may it not be the same; may we not be the same, for what we see tonight turns our eyes upward to a truth that transcends even our best thoughts. Amen.