

Sermon for Christmas Eve Candlelight Worship

December 24, 2019

“Our Manger Moments”

Nativity of Our Lord
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Decorah, Iowa
Rev. Amy Zalk Larson

[Click here to read scripture passages for Christmas Eve.](#)

Beloved of God, grace to you and peace in the name of Jesus - God with us.

This month I've seen many Facebook posts with a picture of a manger and the holy family and the words, "The first Christmas was simple. It's OK if yours is too." I love that permission to celebrate in whatever way you most need. I pray you experience a simple joy and wonder in worship tonight.

However, I don't know that I'd say the first Christmas was all that simple. It strikes me as a pretty complicated, stressful situation.

When things feel anything but simple and easy at Christmas - in our country, in our families, in our lives - we actually have a lot in common with Mary and Joseph.

They are young and unwed and yet expecting a child. An emperor wants to count them so that he can tax them more heavily, which means they have to undergo perilous travel at the end of the pregnancy. When they arrive, there is no room for them. A powerful man's words have created upheaval for common people who've had to crowd into the towns in order to be counted. The only place remaining for Mary and Joseph is among the animals; *there* she gives birth. She has to lay her child in a manger, the animals' feeding trough.

A manger is no place for a child. As Mary places him there, I imagine that she and Joseph worry: Will he be warm enough, will the animals wake him, will he be safe? I imagine they feel a fair bit of anger at the emperor for putting them in this situation in the first place. I imagine they long for home.

Yet, the very thing that likely feels most troublesome to Mary and Joseph - their child lying in a manger - *that* becomes a sign of God's presence. When the shepherds are told that a Savior has been born for them, the angel says, "This will be a sign for you. You will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." I imagine the shepherds are perplexed when they hear this. A savior in a manger? Shouldn't a savior be lying in luxury in a heavily guarded palace?

After the angel and the multitude of the heavenly host depart, the shepherds go with haste to see this thing that has taken place. They find Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they see that strange and unsettling sight, a child in a feeding trough, then they know God has shown up - in the last place you'd expect to find God. What likely feels most troublesome to Mary and Joseph becomes a sign of God's presence.

Conventional wisdom is that we will experience God in peaceful, serene settings. When all seems right with the world, then we'll know God's presence.

Yet in Jesus, God shows up through an unwed peasant couple, living under Roman occupation, who are far from home, who have to place their child in a manger.

Things are difficult, messy, and complicated for Mary and Joseph and it is in the midst of the struggle that God is born through them. God enters into the hardship and brings new life for them and for all the world. Love is born, hope is born for them, for us, for you.

In Christ Jesus, God enters deep into what is most painful. This is where we find God - in the manger, among the poor, on the cross, places you'd least expect to find God. God enters into these places to transform our world from the inside, to bring new life from within.

This is where God still shows up today in unlikely, humble and fragile places - in broken bread and wine poured out, in communities of imperfect people, in those the world considers last and least, in our tenuous faith. God is here. And God is present in our own lives amid those things that feel most worrisome and troublesome to us. God is present for you in your own placing a child in a manger moments, whatever they may be. God is there, love is there, hope is born for you even there.

With this promise for us, we, too, can be signs of God's presence.

Our complicated, messy lives can bear witness to good news of great joy for all people. The good news is that God doesn't wait until everything is calm and peaceful, but rather comes amidst the chaos to work new life from within it all. Just as God showed up through Mary and Joseph and their manger moment, through us God shows up in courtrooms and meetings, in war zones and hospital rooms, in bedrooms and kitchens, in simple, painful or joyful Christmas celebrations. God is there, God is here. New life is happening for us and through us often where we least expect it.

"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."

This message comes to us tonight as it came to the shepherds long ago. There is good news of great joy for all people.

Let your song of joy arise. Share in the wonder of this night. God is here.

Thanks be to God.