

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

December 24, 2023 (Nativity of Our Lord, Christmas Eve)

Luke 2:1-20

Based on Dan Schaeffer, *The Real Gift of Christmas*, "What's Wrong with This Picture?"

I came across a quick video I'd like to show you.

(Show video "*That's the same Jesus*")

He just couldn't put the two concepts, the baby Jesus and the adult Jesus, together – "boom," mind blown.

Actually, I have a similar problem each year. Every Christmas, in our living room, we put out our manger scene—a home-made, rustic-looking stall, crude but charming. Looking at it is a warm, wonderful holiday experience.

The PROBLEM is that I've gazed upon this manger scene so LONG that I've become NUMB to it. I've heard the story so often that I stop THINKING about it. But when I DO think about it, I realize that this scene ISN'T NORMAL. And God DOESN'T WANT me to view it as PRETTY and QUAINT. He wants me to be shocked, appalled, even bewildered and confused; because THEN I would have to THINK about the SCENE, rather than ignore it. What HAPPENED at the manger wasn't DESIGNED to put me in "the holiday mood." It was intended to shake me to the roots of my soul.

Christmas is the day we celebrate the entrance of the eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent, all-righteous, all-holy, and glorious God into our world. When I stop and consider THAT, and then look at that scene of the baby Jesus in the MANGER, I scratch my head and say, "What's WRONG with this picture?"

There are FOUR WORDS in the Christmas story that are MEANT to BLOW our minds: "Lying in a manger." It says: "This will be a sign to you: You will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a MANGER." The God of the ages, TOO GLORIOUS to look upon, is lying in a FEED trough. The God BEFORE whom Moses and Elijah fell down on their knees, and FROM whom the cherubim and seraphim hide their faces, is in a FILTHY STABLE.

Lying in a manger. These four glorious words describe far MORE than the place where the baby Jesus was laid. There's a MESSAGE from GOD here, a PARABLE in four words.

What we CELEBRATE each year may have been a terrible ORDEAL for Mary and Joseph. Was this what Mary envisioned when Elizabeth, her friend and relative, had prophesied that she would be blessed and honored? Mary had GREAT FAITH, but even HER faith must have been CHALLENGED when she entered that STABLE, heavy with child and exhausted from the long journey from Nazareth.

Somehow, I DOUBT that this young woman found her circumstances INSPIRING. In a birth that was SUPPOSED to be a "celebration" of the arrival of the heavenly child, promised through great miracles and dreams, when Mary's LABOR pains began, with NO midwife to help her, when she and Joseph were ALONE in a STABLE, did they ever ASK, "What's wrong with this PICTURE, God?"

Then, mercifully, the SHEPHERDS arrived, sharing their angelic vision and the ALL-IMPORTANT words they had been given — a sign to the world — "a baby lying in a manger." NOT in

a palace, or an ornately decorated crib befitting the Son of God, not in a cozy room with proper comforts for a woman in labor – but in a cold stable. No, the angels’ song was that the baby was RIGHT where He was SUPPOSED to be — lying in a manger.

When Mary and Joseph HEARD those words, I imagine a HUGE sigh of RELIEF! The heavenly pronouncement from the shepherds was a CONFIRMATION that these ROUGH CIRCUMSTANCES were HOLY to GOD. This WASN’T a DIVINE MISTAKE. This was PRECISELY the place God CHOSE to showcase His entrance into our world.

The birth didn’t FIT His divine GLORY, but IN it, we begin to see GLIMMERS of His PURPOSE, WHO He would become. “There was no room for them in the inn,” because in TRUTH, there was no room for Him ANYWHERE. Jesus came to a DECIDEDLY HOSTILE world. He came prepared to ENDURE ALL that WE could THROW at Him. God’s mercy and love toward our cold world COULDN’T have been ANY CLEARER than when He was FOUND lying in a MANGER.

And as we picture Him lying there in simple swaddling clothes, we see something we would NEVER have understood otherwise: It was His LOVE for us that put Him in that stable.

WHY?” we ask ourselves. “Why did a COMMON FEEDING trough HOST the God-Child Himself. Why would God CHOOSE such a FILTHY AND HUMILIATING setting for his birth?”

Why? For us! God HUMBLED Himself, for US, so that we would REALIZE that there was NOTHING He WOULDN’T DO, no LENGTH He WOULDN’T GO to bring us closer to Him. The manger scene reveals as MUCH about the MERCY and LOVE of God as ANY of His LATER WORDS or acts of COMPASSION.

What’s wrong with this picture? Not a thing! Because the crude scene of our God lying in a manger reminds us of THIS PRECIOUS TRUTH: God can be found ANYWHERE, EVERYWHERE – WHEREVER God WANTS to be found: in a cattle trough, among the poor, with the sick, on a donkey, in a fishing boat, with the junkie, with the prostitute, with the hypocrite, with the forgotten ... and with the likes of you and me. God can be found in places of power AND in places of oppression, in prosperity and in POVERTY, where God’s name is KNOWN AND where it is UNKNOWN, with our friends AND with our ENEMIES, in our certainties AND in our DOUBTS, in life AND in DEATH, at the table ... AND on the CROSS.

Why was the Savior of the world lying in a manger? Because the Baby Jesus would GROW UP. And the BABY Jesus and the CROSS Jesus are the SAME JESUS.

God was THERE...

and God is HERE,

and in those swaddling clothes,

and on that cross,

and on his heavenly THRONE,

and in his CHURCH,

and in your HEART TOO.

For NO amount of DARKNESS can OVERCOME HIS LIGHT.

(Show image “Chad Bird -- How far the Lord would the Lord go”)

As Bible scholar Chad Bird wrote,

“If you’ve ever wondered how FAR the Lord would GO to make sure you were here his own,

- Look down into the manger

- Look up onto the cross
There's your answer."

It's the same guy. Amen.