

Thomas R. Cook
St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
10:00 a.m. Celebration of the Holy Eucharist
Christmas Day – December 25, 2019

“A Stable Place Sufficed”

Scripture: Luke 2:1-20; Christmas

I searched a very long time before I found it. Something was moving differently within me as we approached this Christmas. I knew something of the vision I was seeking. And I found it in a painting, and I had that painting printed on the front of your bulletin this morning. It is a scene of the Nativity of the Christ by Gari Melchers, a noted 19th century American artist, the son of German immigrants to the United States.



During my search, it was easy to find dozens, even hundreds, of depictions of angel choirs filling the skies, shepherds crowding into an impossibly clean animal stable with impossibly well-behaved cows and sheep, looking upon an impossibly vibrant and peaceful newborn casting his gaze to his mother. And his mother looking fresh out of the shower, glowing and smiling, hair coifed and covered. And a doting “father” sort of hovering in the scene unsure of how to be. And there was nearly always the company of kings added to the mix, the Magi, you know, Wisemen from the East, with their expensive presents on hand and untethered camels quietly and patiently awaiting them.

The sky is clear. The stars are bright. The weather is perfect. And everything is well with the world.

And, you know, maybe... maybe something like that scene is all so very true... in that one quiet moment... when the child is born and it feels as if the earth sort of stops turning and the wheels of human industry stop spinning. But that moment, that Christmas pause, could only really be ever so brief. For the animals will grow restless in the presence of strangers. The shepherds will stink. The angels will fade into the heavens. The Wise Men will head for home. The innkeeper will intrude in the wee hours of the morning to milk the cows. And what is left... is likely the cold,

cramped and dirty floor of a stall, the noise and press of disinterested people moving through the crowded streets outside seeking their own shelter, the stamping boots of Roman soldiers ready at any moment to use violence to keep the peace. A perplexed father, wondering what just happened... and what comes next? An exhausted mother, spent and tired from the labors of childbirth. And the tiny baby. Even the baby Jesus will be hungry soon, and will make his presence known in the only way babies can... he will cry. Maybe even loud enough to wake the neighbors.

I see in that picture on the front of our bulletin something of the raw and challenging truth of the plight of Mary and Joseph and their little newborn son, Jesus. Two parents and their son in a wide and unwelcoming world. And, you know, in that picture, I find real comfort.

Because in that picture is a vision of how God chooses to enter our world, our everyday world. Because the world and the times into which Jesus is born are rough and unsettled... like our own. Peace is balanced always on the edge of a sword. The common people labor often barely to earn their daily bread, while others live lavishly and unconcerned. Many of their leaders are all too often complacent and uncaring when it comes to the daily struggles of ordinary citizens. Yet it is into that kind of world that the Son of God chooses to come... with the cooperation of an humble

man and a remarkably faithful young woman. It is a world not perfect, rather it is a world in need. A world needing someone to come and say to it:

Blessed are the poor in spirit...

Blessed are you when you are sad...

Blessed are the humble and the merciful and the faithful
and the peaceful... and...

Love one another.

Yes, even... love your enemy.

Take care of each other.

You are made for this.

There is no higher calling.

And that someone who brings this message to us we call the Son of God.

The world needed Jesus to come and say that then. And the world needs someone to say it now. And that someone in our time?... Well, that would be us, the ones who gather on this morning in celebration of Jesus' birth.

The Nativity as we have envisioned it and celebrated it for thousands of years, with angel choirs and a silent and holy night, is deeply moving and beautiful. And I

love that about Christmas. But these acrimonious times in which we live call me also to love the family depicted on our bulletin cover... vulnerable, worried, exhausted, probably frightened... yet very, very brave. Mary and Joseph with their son, Jesus, face their world with courage... the courage to be faithful to their God, to remain hopeful for their life together, to trust that God is doing for them more good than they could ask or imagine. And if that family, with all they had to endure, can have the courage to be... to be hopeful, to be kind, to be faithful in their own challenging times, so can we in these not so different times. The message of the Prince of Peace is not lost in the shuffle of a busy world, but we sure may have to listen carefully for it sometimes, look hard for it, and speak love where there is far too little.

German theologian Jorg Zink once said that "...this man [Jesus] from Nazareth comes to us and invites us to mirror God's image, and shows us how. He says: 'You too can become light, as God is light.' Because [no matter how bad the world may get - *added by sermon author*] what is all around you is not hell, but rather a world waiting to be filled with hope and faith."¹

That family on the cover of our bulletin today —Joseph, worried; Mary, exhausted; and Jesus, a tiny and vulnerable baby— that is hope born to humankind.

¹ From *Synthesis* for Christmas Day 2019.

That is a vision of faith and courage to sustain us along our way. That is love born for us at Christmas. A divine love that never fades away. Now, I pray we will have the courage to share that love with a world still sorely in need of it. And that can be our ongoing gift of Christmas.

Merry Christmas.