

Blue Christmas Service: “Remembrance of the First Christmas” • Matthew 11:28-30
Sheth LaRue • December 21, 2020
Aurora First Presbyterian Church

My parents have a nativity set that looks a lot like the one here on the piano. It’s a stark white porcelain set with all the figures you would expect in a creche: Mary, Joseph, baby Jesus – of course; but also wisemen and shepherds, sheep and cows and camels and angels. It’s a gorgeous set, clean and shiny and easy on the eye. My parents’ set was beautiful and I would long stare at those pieces and imagine that beautiful evening in Galilee long ago. I imagined them all gathered around in the stable, adoring the infant child, each piece gently singing: “Silent night, holy night! All is calm, all is bright, round yon virgin mother and child! Holy infant, so tender and mild, sleep in heavenly peace.”¹

While nativity scenes can be a comfort, I wonder if they don’t set up a standard that we try all-too-hard to attain, not just here in the holiday season, but year-round. The pressures around us and within us tell us that *everything* needs to be clean and shiny. All the pieces of our lives need to be decent and in order. Hair in just the right spot...clothes of only the latest fashion...shoes, cute and trendy. Instagram posts show our happy, glittery, positive selves. Facebook posts depict our rough and rugged ways of living with IPA’s, beards, and axe throwing. We smile through the tough times and repeat those catchy Christian phrases when we hit a bump: “God has a plan,” “God never gives us more than we can handle!” or “God needed another angel!” We work hard to project a life that’s clean and shiny and gorgeous, full of God-loving fun.

As idyllic and peaceful as my parents’ nativity scene looked, it is highly doubtful that the actual situation looked that way. If that small porcelain set came to life, it would no doubt be a loud, smelly, chaotic scene. The animals would be fighting, camels would be spitting, and the magi’s gifts would be trampled into the dirt. The shepherds would be trying to tell everyone about the angel they just saw, Joseph would be elbows deep in dirty diapers, Jesus would be bawling his eyes out, and Mary would be tired and exasperated, yelling at everyone to just be quiet! While these nativity scenes are lovely to look at, we all know the truth: life is messy, dirty, chaotic, and difficult.

¹ “Silent Night, Holy Night” Joseph Mohr, 1816.

We've been through a tough year...a messy, dirty, chaotic, difficult year full of losses. And for some of us, this is just one of many that we've had to face. We've been hit hard by death, not just by COVID-19, but by cancer, suicide, homicide, heart attack, old age. We've been forced into unemployment, some without work for a month, others without work for years. While some have been able to weather the storm, many of us are living life on a credit cards, having long-since burned through the pittance of a government stimulus. Our bodies hurt from old age or too much physical labor or debilitating disease, and we have never found relief. We have lost loved ones...we have lost work and meaning...we have lost finances...we have lost the will.

As we have entered into this holiday season with all it's shine and glitter and cries for making it 'the best one ever' we collapse to our knees because we cannot do *that* this year. We can't pretend any more that the nativity is shiny and clean and quiet because our hope has been stretched thin and our peace is walking out the door. Joy has long since disappeared and love teeters on the precipice. The night is far from silent and we hurt this Christmas season.

"Christian culture often says, 'If you are full of faith, you won't get hurt, confused and discouraged. You won't feel hopeless or have a life filled with pain and loss.' This [is a] myth [and it] doesn't do justice to our lives, to Scripture or to the life of Jesus."² On nights like this one, when the darkness is long and cold, we need to lament. We need to "approach God with the realities of sorrow, frustration and angst that consume and distract"³ – we need to speak our hurt, voice our frustration, admit our grief...we need to cry and shout and sit in wordless prayer.

Listen to the words of the psalmist: "How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? How long must I bear pain in my soul, and have sorrow in my heart all day long? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?"⁴ There's nothing glittery about that – it's the contents of the author's heart out there for all of us to see.

Listen to the words found in Lamentations: "Cry out to the Lord...let your tears flow like a river day and night; give yourself no relief, your eyes no rest."⁵ Far from the world's suggestion to get a grip on oneself, Jeremiah implores us to open up the floodgates and to not let it stop.

² Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 273.

³ Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015), 272.

⁴ Psalm 13:1-2

⁵ Lamentations 2:18

Y'all, your emotions today – and every day – are valid. It's okay to not be okay. You can have messy hair. And your beard can be a mess. Your heart can be shattered and your emotions can be raw. Your feelings can be hurt and your checking account can have nothing in it and you can be holding on by the thinnest of threads. But tell God. Tell God that you're hurting. Tell God that you feel forgotten and that you've been crying. Tell God that you're hungry and tired and want something to drink. Tell God what is truthfully in your heart of hearts, because you are crying out that you believe in "a good God, a God who has His ear to our hearts, a God who transfigures the ugly into beauty."⁶

Scripture is true when it says that God will wipe every tear away. Every sorrow will be behind us. Every pain will be eased. But until *that* day we have a place to go and a way to pray. Friends, God is familiar with tears and pain and grief – when God entered the world through that manger, God opened Godself to all that we experience. God wept. God hungered. God thirsted. God was unemployed and living off of the kindness of strangers. God didn't have enough. God was afraid, and scared, and lonely. God experienced every single thing you are feeling right now.

This is as good a time as any to heed Jesus' words: "Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest." Friends, we are invited to meet Emmanuel – God with us – right where we are. Jesus didn't say, "Clean yourself up, get your hair did, and then come to me." No! Just come. Come to me and I will give you rest. All we need to do is show up. That's it. Show up and walk with Jesus. Talk with Jesus. Learn from Jesus. Bring all our burdens, all our hurts, all our fears and trust that Jesus will give us rest.

It's a dark night for sure, but the light is coming. The light is coming and darkness cannot overcome it. The light is coming. The light is coming.

⁶ Ann Voskamp, from *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook*, Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2015, 272.