

## **A PHOTOSHOPPED NATIVITY**

**LUKE 1:39-45, 2:1-7**

**Rev. John Annable, University Baptist Church    Sunday, December 22, 2024**

In three more days, we will be celebrating Christmas once again by retelling the *old old story of Jesus and His love*. Which happens to be the words found in the song written by Katherine Hankey.

Tell me the old, old story  
Of unseen things above,  
Of Jesus and His glory,  
Of Jesus and His love.  
Tell me the story simply,  
As to a little child;  
For I am weak and weary,  
And helpless and defiled.

Tell me the story slowly,  
That I may take it in -  
That wonderful redemption,  
God's remedy for sin.  
Tell me the story often,  
For I forget so soon;  
The early dew of morning  
Has passed away at noon.

As we retell the story of Mary and Joseph finding no room in the inn because it was filled with others who had made the journey to be enrolled for the tax, which was required, when Quirinus was governor of Syria. As we mention the shepherds working in the field watching over the flock to protect the sheep from harm and becoming lost if they strayed from the fold. As we will retell again in coming days the story of the magi who made the journey to follow the star that will lead them to find the one who is born king of the Jews. Those stories will be told in word and song and in the hearts of the people who will hear it with faith and hope. And we will tell the old old story by the nativity sets we display.

Many people have collected nativity scenes over the years and display them each year inviting the community to come and see them. Most of us will have at least one that we display from year to year.

Some of them will be those who made ourselves. I made one by cutting out the characters from a piece of wood with a jigsaw and glued a bottom board over the part not used for the characters which became the stable. It became a jigsaw puzzle with the various characters of the Nativity simply *"to tell the old old story."* This set was one meant to be played with as little ones would assemble them to represent their nativity scene and then be fascinated by the challenge of putting the puzzle back together.

Some of you are familiar with Live Nativity Scenes. While pastor of the church in Cahokia we had such a scene. Costumes we made and we had people to represent the characters of Mary and Joseph and the baby, (wrapped very carefully to protect it from what was occasionally a cold night), and Shepherds and Wise Men.

To make sure the Shepherds were authentic we borrowed livestock from a neighbor across a busy four lane highway in front of the church and each evening the police would arrive to stop the traffic so we could shepherd them across the street and later in the evening they would return to do it again. Because of the trouble involved in that process we would only do it three nights.

It is interesting to see the variety of sets that have been made. And it is interesting to see the different

characters that show up in each of them. If you go to the Amazon shopping site and look at them you will find an elaborate, finely carved Nativity, done as a typical Korean rural event. There's a thatched room stable, magi in Korean dress, and a Korean Mary and Joseph watching over the manger. What I love is that there are also chickens and, would you believe it, two fat pigs. While it's hard to imagine pigs around the first Nativity at Bethlehem, it turns out that Koreans traditionally love their pigs, and their families are dependent upon them for survival, so there are two pigs.

From Alabama you will find a Nativity scene made out of dark Alabama clay, or maybe it's mud. This Nativity looks earthy, simple, childlike and primitive and is beautiful. That goes alongside another Nativity, a finely sculpted piece by a noted Alabama folk artist. It's also done in clay, but it's glazed white, and the figures are all in contemporary dress, an up-to-date rendition of the Nativity with people who are made to look a lot like folks who might gather at a stable today.

One reason why we love Nativity scenes is that it's a great way to read ourselves into the wonder of the Christmas story. The people who are in the Nativity are people who look a lot like us. The animal figurines look much like what you would see in any barnyard today in our part of the world.

So, if you are familiar with photoshopping you understand why I might entitle the sermon for today as "*A Photoshopped Nativity*." In fact, as I have said before our Advent Bible Study for this year asked us who the characters are in our nativity scenes. Would Herod be among them? We have Mary, of course, but do we have Elizabeth.

This Sunday, as we stand on the threshold of Christmas, Luke presents us with a kind of pre-nativity scene, two people who look a lot like us. We're not in a barnyard, and the figures are not Mary, Joseph, angels, and the gathered animals. We see two women, one young and one old, embracing one another. They are Mary and Elizabeth. They are related to one another in more ways than one. They are cousins, yes, but they are also two women whose lives have been turned upside down in the last few months. Mary—we all know her story, with an angel barging in upon her, telling her that she is going to have a baby, even though she is unmarried. Her fiancé, Joseph, is jolted by this news, so Matthew tells us who wouldn't be, as he thought of dismissing her quietly. Mary is also discombobulated by the angel's announcement. Still, she tells the angel, in effect, "*I have no idea what all this means, but here I am anyway. I'll trust the Lord to work through all this.*"

A few months into her pregnancy, she goes to visit her cousin Elizabeth, perhaps to share this surprising news with her. When they embrace, the child Elizabeth is bearing leaps in her womb. (Elizabeth's pregnancy was almost as surprising as Mary's. She was childless and advanced in years and thought she was well past the time of childbearing.)

Then Elizabeth, inspired by the Holy Spirit, says to Mary, in effect, "*The child I'm bearing has changed everything for me. I thought my life was ending, but now God has made a whole new chapter and given me a future. And the child you are carrying will be a wonder for the world. This child will grow up to be the savior of our people. God is doing some amazing things through us.*"

Amazing? That's an understatement. Here are these two women, one young and unmarried, another older and childless, swept up into a saga, not of their own devising. In her conversation with Mary, Elizabeth becomes a prophet, inspired by the Holy Spirit (what else is a "*prophet*" other than someone who speaks under the instigation of the Holy Spirit?). She prophesies that God's hand is in all of this. What Mary and Elizabeth, in different ways, experience as disruptive, unplanned pregnancies, Elizabeth interprets as God moving among them.

I hear two things while listening in on Mary and Elizabeth's meeting:

One: God loves to surprise. Elizabeth is a prophet, just like the babe in her womb (who will become John the Baptist). Prophets are imagination people. They ask us to dream big, to see the future as God's playground. Time and again, in Israel's history, when God's people thought they were at a dead end, the prophets looked forward and saw a future that was being fashioned by God's hand.

Perhaps we are always surprised by a prophet's foretelling, surprised that the future is not all up to us, that

God is busy, making a way when we thought there was no way.

The late theologian Robert Jenson once said that the way you can tell the difference between a living God and a dead God (aka idol) is that a dead God will never surprise you. Idols are unsurprising because we have made them for ourselves; they are a projection of our imaginations, our hopes, and our fears. But God projects God's future, which is always surprising and often a bit disruptive and discombobulating because it's God's, not ours. Expect to be surprised.

Two: The story of these two women is not only a story of surprise but also of vocation. Sorry if you thought Almighty God works solo or God doesn't need ordinary folk like us to do what God chooses to do. God elects to do what God wants done in the world through people the world has never heard of—women on the margins—those whom the world considers either too young to be given much responsibility (Mary) or too old to have anything worthwhile to contribute to the future (Elizabeth), ordinary people who are tapped by God and given responsibilities they would never have assigned themselves.

As a pastor, I've been privileged to know lots of Mary's and Elizabeths, though with different names. Some of them were surprised to have God call them to do some task for God that God wanted done. Maybe they weren't surprised by an angel but they still sensed God's call upon their lives. And they, like Mary or Elizabeth, responded, *"I don't know why you are calling me, and I'm not sure what all this means, and though I find this to be disrupting, maybe even a bit embarrassing, here I am. Let it be according to your will."*

One woman in her eighties was called by her pastor who was making calls on the elderly before Christmas. Working his way down the list, he called her and asked if he could drop by for a visit.

*"Not this month, preacher,"* she responded. *"Be glad to see you after Christmas."*

A bit taken aback, he said, *"The Days before Christmas can be a busy time with family and gifts and all."*

She responded, *"Got no family to speak of and few friends. I'm busy with my tree ministry right up through Christmas Eve."*

Tree ministry? *"Yep. Some years ago, the Lord laid on my heart that there were families in this town that couldn't afford a Christmas tree. I also figured out that there were trees that were wasted and unsold on the lots. So, anyway, somehow, the Lord planted in me the notion to go out two weeks before Christmas and then begin dickering with the tree sellers, offering to take leftover trees off their hands for a song—same way with the lights. Now, the stores expect me to hit them a couple of weeks before Christmas, so they have their unsold Christmas tree lights waiting for me when I get there. Anyway, I pile all that into my car and make my rounds in town."*

In his mind's eye, he saw her old, battered, vintage Cadillac, with a backseat and open trunk full of trees and lights. But she rapidly continued:

*"I don't know why God put this in my mind. I guess because I've got no children or family. Maybe because the Lord needed somebody as smart-mouthed as me to do the work. Anyway, I'm too busy before Christmas to entertain you. Bye."*

I think her name must have been Elizabeth, or maybe it was Mary, making a future that folks couldn't have made for themselves.

Now, do you understand why we set up nativity scenes in our churches and homes this time of year?

I have entitled the sermon, *"A Photoshopped Nativity."* As we celebrate Christmas this year who will we photoshop into the scene and who will we photoshop out? If Jesus was doing it there would be a lot added.

In 1994, two Americans were allowed to teach and help care for children in an orphanage in Korea. About 100 boys and girls who had been abandoned, abused, and left in the care of a government-run program were in the orphanage. These two told of something that happened that helped them to recovery "the old old story of Jesus and His love."

It was nearing the holiday season, 1994 they said, time for our orphans to hear, for the first time, the traditional story of Christmas. We told them about Mary and Joseph arriving in Bethlehem. Finding no room in the inn, the couple went to a stable where the baby Jesus was born and placed in a manger. Throughout the

story, the children and orphanage staff sat in amazement as they listened. Some sat on the edges of their stools, trying to grasp every word.

Completing the story, we gave the children three small pieces of cardboard to make a crude manger. Each child was given a small paper square, cut from yellow napkins I had brought with me. No colored paper was available in the city.

Following instructions, the children tore the paper and carefully laid strips in the manger for straw. Small squares of flannel (cut from a worn-out nightgown a lady was throwing away as she left), were used for the baby's blanket. A doll-like baby was cut from tan felt we had brought from the United States.

The orphans were busy assembling their manger as I walked among them to see if they needed any help. All went well until I got to one table where little Misha sat. He looked to be about 6-years-old and had finished his project. As I looked at the little boy's manger, I was startled to see not one, but two babies in the manger.

Quickly, I called for the translator to ask the lad why there were two babies in the manger. Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at this completed manger scene, the child began to repeat the story very seriously.

For such a young boy, who had only heard the Christmas story once, he related the happenings accurately until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he started doing his own photoshopping:

*"And when Mary laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay. I told him I have no mamma and I have no papa, so I don't have any place to stay. Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him. But I told him I couldn't, because I didn't have a gift to give Him like everybody else did."*

*"But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much, so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept Him warm, that would be a good gift."*

*So, I asked Jesus, "If I keep You warm, will that be a good enough gift?"*

*And Jesus told me, "If you keep Me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave Me."*

*So, I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and He told me I could stay with Him for always."*

As little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook as he sobbed and sobbed. The little orphan had found someone who would never abandon nor abuse him, someone who would stay with him for always.

And the Americans? They had learned the lesson they had come there to teach that it is not what you have in your life, but Who you have in your life that really counts.

We all should give thanks for the people that "keep us"- in life - and for all of God's many blessings to us: freedom from want, life, love, togetherness, and for the enduring love of Jesus Christ, the one person who keeps us warm and safe for always.

Maybe this year would be a good year for us to photoshop ourselves into the nativity scene, sent by God for a purpose to be a part of the coming Good News that we retell when we share the old old story of Jesus and his love and enable others to be able to sing from the depth of their souls, *Joy to the world, the Lord is come!*