

Sermon, St. Matthew's Anglican Church, Islington
December 24th, 2014 - Christmas Eve

Readings: Is 9:2-7; Ps 96; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

Advent starts in tears. The prophet Isaiah expresses the desire of a broken nation, "Oh that you would tear open the heavens and come down!" The people were experiencing the devastating effects of empire: the local economy was in shambles, the cities in ruins, starvation and sickness ran rampant, families were split apart, and violence was in the streets.

Fast forward a few centuries and things were much the same. We like to imagine Jesus' birth as this beautifully serene moment: young Mary dressed in a clean, blue gown looking down lovingly at her baby boy sleeping peacefully; Joseph, standing tall at her side, well-behaved animals captivated by the newborn; shepherds bowing in reverent awe; and of course, baby Jesus is positively glowing in that quaint little bed of hay. These images, captured in our paintings and stained-glass windows, threaten to sanitize, and thus distance us, from the reality of the situation.

The nativity scene was messy. A few years ago an English bishop suggested churches add a bucket of fresh manure to their traditional Christmas decorations to lend a grain of authenticity to the scene. For some reason not a single chancel guild, that I'm aware of, jumped at the invitation. But I think he was on to something. It was a messy, smelly, chaotic situation. A young, very pregnant mother spending hours on a donkey on her way to an overcrowded town all so that an emperor could ensure he was getting all the taxes he was due. This young woman then had to give birth in a smelly cave, surrounded by animals and grimy strangers.

I picture Joseph struggling to keep the stubborn animals away from Mary and their new son. I bet neither of them was too thrilled when those 'rough around the edges' shepherds intruded on their intimate moment. I imagine Mary's complete exhaustion from travelling on hot, dusty roads all day only to then experience all those excruciating contractions. I'm sorry, but there's no way that after all that Mary has the strength to stand over baby Jesus looking all heavenly – she probably passed out from exhaustion and lay curled up in a corner! I can see Mary's rest interrupted by the cries of her newborn – yes, I'm pretty sure baby Jesus cried, no matter what the words in 'Away in a Manger' say. If he was a human baby (which the Scriptures clearly attest), then that meant crying, amongst other wonderful things newborns do.

Interesting isn't it, that the cries of the people for God to come down are answered in the cries of the infant Christ?

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Let's be honest: we here today probably have a hard time truly picturing the nativity scene. And most of us in North America do not understand the climate of destitution Mary and Joseph found themselves in. They were without shelter, refugees far from home. They lived under the shadow of the Roman Empire that regarded them as barely human. Their supposed leaders, like King Herod, were often violent tyrants (recall Matthew's account of Herod massacring newborns in an attempt to eliminate his rival). We hear of the Holy Family fleeing to Egypt to live as refugees to escape this violence.

Their story might seem a little foreign to us Canadians, but doesn't it sound like the world we live in? Doesn't Mary's story resemble in some way the 21st-century Iraqi refugee mother, living with 20 others in a refugee tent, delivering her baby without medical help and wrapping the child in a shirt taken literally off the back of another. Doesn't the tale of the young family fleeing for their lives from a vicious dictator sound a little like families running into the jungle to escape the clutches of the soldiers of Boko Haram? Or perhaps it's not unlike the Coptic Christians in Egypt that pay protection money to Islamic overlords to avoid their wrath? We live in a world where Islamic extremists carry out frighteningly effective acts of violence all over the world, whether under the banner of ISIS or Al Qaeda, and they don't care who gets caught in the wake of their so-called holy war.

This is the kind of world that God chose to enter. The cries of the infant Jesus mirrored the cries of a desperate people – he chose to become vulnerable and defenseless to face the powers of sin and death in the world. He chose to be one of us. God tore open the heavens and came down to be with us in all our filth and brokenness and chaos.

Rev. William Portman, a retired priest, writes this about God coming to be with us in poverty and weakness:

“The Incarnation, the earthly life of Jesus, took place in the heart of those realities. The son of God entered this world not in glory and comfort as a guest of the upper classes, but as the child of a peasant couple, born in a barn behind a fourth-rate hotel, in a third-rate town, in a second-rate country that was a backwater of the Roman Empire. Christmas is God coming to live among us as an ordinary person with no special privileges. Were this not so, it would not be real, and we would not be celebrating it as the source of our hope all these centuries later.”

Tonight is a most holy night, but it's not holy because it's clean or quaint, it's because tonight we celebrate that God came, and continues to come, to live with us, in us, and

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through us. God's Spirit is alive and active in each one of us in the middle of all our failings, neuroses, and sickness. And we don't have to live in the Middle East, past or present, or experience poverty or violence, to know what's it's like to live in a land of deep darkness.

We can empathize with those living under a shroud of fear: A man bent over his toilet bowl prays that the chemo and its torturous side effects won't be for nothing. A grandmother alone at Christmas hopes that her family won't forget her this year and will visit her soon. A young mother looks on helplessly through a maternity ward window as her newborn struggles for each breath. A small child hopes that this Christmas will be different, that mommy won't scream at daddy, and that daddy won't hurt mommy. He asks Santa not for presents for himself, but that his parents would be nice to each other.

Tonight the cries of the broken are interrupted by the cries of Child God. Tonight the question changes from 'Why does God allow suffering?' to 'How could God love us so much to come and suffer with us?' Tonight we reflect on the fact that God comes to us in the ordinary: in the simple things, in the messy circumstances, in our tears, and in our laughter.

God is birthed in waiting rooms and soup kitchens, in arguments and joke telling. God comes to us in 'thank you's' and acts of kindness. God incarnates us when we forgive, and trust, and love. God is seen within us when we become vulnerable and choose to put others before ourselves. And God comes to us when we're broken, when we've got nowhere else to go, and no one else to go to.

Christ came to be with us in all our humanity, and his mission would lead him down the path of horrific suffering and death before moving through the gates of resurrection life. He did all this to save us from our sin, to heal us from all wounds, to rescue us from the clutches of death. Perhaps we should have used some manure as part of our Christmas décor? It would remind us that Christ came to clean up our messes and chooses to be with us through all the muck and mire we experience.

I pray that whatever circumstance you find yourself in this Christmas, you would be able to affirm Isaiah's declaration, "The people who have sat in darkness have seen a great light; those who have lived in a dark land, on them a light has dawned." Amen.