

Making Room at the Manger: Widening the Circle

Luke 2: 1-14

There is a shared lesson among preachers which tells us to preach the good news always, using words if necessary. Then there is a different shared lesson among preachers which says, “One should always know when a sermon is not necessary because it distracts from the text.” This is the fine line which I have walked this week, wondering if we really needed another sermon on this beloved, well-known text this Sunday while trying to honor our call to act and speak in such a way that we become living testimonies to a loving God.

As you can probably tell, I decided to go with yet another sermon on this beloved text. Not because I think I can add anything to it. I don't presume to be that eloquent or that important.

No, I decided to go with yet another sermon on this beloved text because I was reminded once again, that we as people of faith, as the ones who know, the ones who have experienced the true gift of Jesus' birth in our lives, we have an opportunity to reclaim this story as Gospel. Today and all days, we as people of faith have an opportunity to begin living out the good news of God's grace which this text brings, begin living out the good news of God's love which this text

shares so that no one will ever be able to say they have never experienced the life transforming presence of God in their lives simply because as the ones who know God's love, we failed to share it with others. I decided to go with another sermon on this beloved text because Luke reminded me how truly earth shattering this story really is for us as people of faith. It captures our attentions. It captures our imaginations. This well-known beloved story invites us to become the people God created us to be....that is if we allow it to open our hearts and minds to the new life it promises.

Here's why I say this: Unfortunately, this story has been shared so many times that it has simply become background noise for all our other Christmas celebrations. This story has been acted out so many times in cute children's Christmas pageants, that this grace filled story has lost its edge. All of us, the ones sitting in the pews and the ones waiting right outside our doors, all of us need to hear again it life-giving message so that we never ever forget that God is making room at the manger for all of God's children, making room for all to experience the welcome and love of God.

You see, this story is not about some cute little baby born in a manger. This story is about old expectations being shattered. This story is about old assumptions being proven false. This story about widening the circling so that no one is left out or excluded.

Or let me say it this way... Each year, as I get ready to set up our family's nativity scene, one question always comes to mind... "Who gets to be near Jesus?" Usually when this question comes to mind, spread out before me are a wooden stable with an array of various characters, some distinguishable and some not, all ready to be placed, all ready to find their space at the manger next to baby Jesus.

The Mary figurine is the easiest to be placed. After all, she is the mother and should probably be the closest to the baby. But when we think about Mary's story, is she really the type of person we want near Jesus? She is an unwed mother, someone who would not have been welcomed by the majority of people during that day and time, let alone would she have been celebrated and sanctified for all time by religious institutions. And yet, there she is, placed close to Jesus, loved and empowered by God's love to sing of God's prophetic grace.

Next come the shepherds. In our modern day manger scenes, they have been cleaned up and sanitized. But in real life, the shepherds would have been covered in dirt and grime while wearing the lovely fragrance of eau de sheep and other animal. Shepherds would not have been welcomed in most houses. They were poor. They were the lowest of the low job profession and yet, they were and are the key figures in the telling of the Good News! The shepherds were the first to hear that a child has been born unto us by a heavenly chorus of angels.

Next come the wise men. They are decked out in gold, looking all important, bearing gifts for the new born king, ready to make their entrance into our humble manger scenes. On the surface, they are exactly the type of people who should be near Jesus...important and royal, people who would understand the significance of this moment. Yet when we take another look at these wise men characters, we notice something else. They look differently from everyone else. They were foreign outsiders, coming to Bethlehem from other countries. They were Gentiles who would not have been embraced by Israel. And yet, they were the only ones who understood the meaning behind the new star in the sky. All the others, the religious leaders, the powers that be, and the supposed insiders had to be reminded of the prophecy which stated “and you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel.” These outsiders, these foreigners are given a place of honor, close to the baby Jesus, all because they understood how God was at work in that moment to bring healing and wholeness for all of God’s children while the insiders trembled in fear, not wanting or willing to accept that their world have been changed through the word of Jesus’ birth.

Now, as we look at the manger scene, we can see that it is almost complete. Only a few pieces remain to be placed, you know the occasional sheep, the donkey, maybe a goat or two. But wait...we left a figure out of the scene. Thankfully, he is

marked on the bottom with the name “Joseph.” Otherwise, how would we know? This figure could easily pass for a shepherd or the inn keeper. There is nothing to distinguish him from all the other characters in our manger scene, which is sad really, because without Joseph, this scene doesn’t work! Joseph is the needed piece of the puzzle. He is the one with the royal lineage, tracing it all the way back to King David, the promised line from which the Messiah will come. Yet, even with the right credentials and the right background, Joseph still didn’t quite fit in with the larger Israelite society of that time. After all, he broke with tradition. He took Mary as his wife, even after he knew she was with child, something that would have excluded him from certain circles. But he took the risk, all because God’s word opened his heart to the amazing possibilities of hope and peace in his midst, if he only had the courage to listen. In our manger scene, Joseph is embraced. He is welcomed, all because he did as the angel commanded and listened to God’s word.

Through this most holy, sacred moment, acted out in the manger scenes displayed in our houses, in our churches, in our communities, and in our world, we see and experience the power of God’s love. We realize that this moment of grace and love brought together a group of people, people from different countries, people from different backgrounds, people from different social classes, God’s love brought all of them together to experience the wonderful gift of this baby lying in the manger. And for us, as people of faith, it still has the power to do the

same today. The manger invites us all to gather closer to Jesus. It invites us to see the possibilities of God's Kingdom made real in our midst. This manger scene calls us to make room for all of God's people, by widening the circle to include all, to welcome all, and to see everyone as Beloved Children of God.

Or as one person put it..."[The story of] Christ's birth, [the story of] the manger reminds us of the choices we have when facing our neighbors. Yes, it's easier to declare "no room in the inn," especially for the unruly, the burdened and destitute. But when we make up our minds to find space at the manger [for all of God's people], the true face of Christ has the opportunity to emerge."

The power of this text is that this good news of God's grace and peace is not just shared with us in one word or phrase. This news of God's love is shared with us throughout the whole text, throughout the whole story, from the beginning of the Bible until the very last page. That's why we love this story. That's why we tell it over and over again, not because it is cute but because it is powerful enough to change lives. It reminds us that our God loved us so much that God sent God's only son so that we would know the breadth and depth of God's love for each and every one of us.

This story, our Story, God's story, widens the circle to include all of God's children. This story of Jesus' birth reminds us that when the world tells us there is

not enough, not enough love, not enough grace, not enough resources, as people of faith, we know a different story. We know the life giving, life changing story of how God's love made room at the manger for a unwed mother and social outcasts to hear the angels' songs, how God's love made room for someone to break from what society said was right and instead do what was right in the eyes of God. As people of faith, we know a different story, a story how God's love made room for strangers and foreigners to be made welcome. When the world tells us that there is no room at the inn, we as the ones who know the power of God's transforming love, we are called to tell a different story. We are called to widen the circle by proclaiming now and forevermore how God's love made room at the manger for all of God's people, including imperfect, beautifully made and loved more than we can ever imagine, how God's love made room for people like you and me. May it be so. Amen.