

Luke 2:1-20 (KJV)

¹ And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus, that all the world should be taxed. ² (*And* this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) ³ And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) ⁵ To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. ⁶ And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. ⁷ And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

⁸ And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid. ¹⁰ And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, ¹⁴ Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men. ¹⁵ And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us. ¹⁶ And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger. ¹⁷ And when they had seen *it*, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. ¹⁸ And all they that heard *it* wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds. ¹⁹ But Mary kept all these things, and pondered *them* in her heart. ²⁰ And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

The Manger Has It All

A sermon preached at North Prospect Union United Church of Christ, Medford, Massachusetts

Date: December 23, 2007

Rev. Dudley C. Rose

Text: *Luke 2:1-20*

Behind me the creche sits on the table, a tableau of the Nativity story. In the shed lies the child. Around him gather, in more or less concentric semi-circles, his parents, the barn animals, the shepherds and the magi. This simple representation suffers onslaught in the current age. Some think the scene makes a hegemonic claim for Christianity, and they object especially strenuously when it is placed in public spaces. There is much important to say on either side of Christianity's place in the culture and of the First Amendment rights and constraints. This morning, however, I want to consider the onslaughts the creche receives from within the church rather than from the outside.

I have in mind two related criticisms that are hurled into the poor little shed. First, Biblical scholars are largely agreed that the stories of Jesus birth that we have in Matthew and Luke are probably not factual. Jesus was born; he existed. There's plenty of evidence for that. But the circumstances of Mary's pregnancy, the trip to Bethlehem, the innkeeper, our stable and its plaster characters; scholars are skeptical about all of them. For many Christians this claim that the sacred story is fiction is unpalatable. To say it didn't happen this way is to say that the Bible is filled with lies, blasphemy to the core.

Such a reaction is understandable. For it seems that truth itself is at stake. But, of course, the great superstition of our age is that truth only and always means factual by scientific standards. Even in our own age, such a view rules out our greatest literature, not to mention our capacity for faith. In reflecting on our faith Frederick Buechner famously says,

"Christianity is mainly wishful thinking. Even the part about Judgment and Hell reflects the wish that somewhere the score is being kept.

"Dreams are wishful thinking. Children playing at being grown-up is wishful thinking. Interplanetary travel is wishful thinking," he says.

Then Buechner goes on to hit the nail on the head, "Sometimes," he says, "wishing is the wings the truth comes true on. Sometimes the truth is what sets us wishing for it."¹

What Buechner understands is that there is an intrinsic relationship between the human heart and the truth. Sometimes the wishes of the heart create truth. Sometimes truth itself lights a fire within the heart, and the heart warms to the truth without quite knowing how or why.

Brothers and sisters, this truth is at least as true as forensic kind. It is the form of truth most often captured in most of the Bible. It is certainly the truth in the Bible's story of Christmas.

*** But wait. Our problems aren't over. There are more critics of the creche demanding our attention. They say, "We agree about what you said about the way truth is represented in the

¹Frederick Buechner, *Wishful Thinking*, 1973, 96.

stories, but let's keep the stories straight." They walk up to our little table, and they begin to move things around. "Now, first of all," they say, "Where did these animals come from? There aren't any cows and donkeys in the story. Here, get them out of here. And the shepherds? They came, but it doesn't say they brought their sheep with them. In fact it says, 'They came with haste,' which pretty much precludes the sheep. Have you ever tried to hurry sheep? It's not happening. Here, get the sheep out of here.

"Now, what about these wise men and these camels? This whole setup looks like somebody's idea of everyone's home for the Holidays. First of all, you know that the shepherds are in Luke and the wise men are in Matthew, right? But, you've set the thing up like they are one story. But they are two stories. Don't you think it would be better to just tell one at a time? Here, get these wise men out of here, too. We're reading Luke today. There, that's much better. We've got a shed; Jesus, Joseph and Mary; some shepherds; no animals; no wise men. There, much better."

Um. Much better? I'm not sure. I'm not sure this improves on either the wings of wishing or the ember of truth burning in our hearts. It feels a little antiseptic. I miss the animals and the wise men.

More important it raises a question. I mean, what does it all mean? Is its meaning found in getting the literary analysis just right? I mean, what room does that leave for the story to glow and even grow in our hearts? The truth that grows from our wishing the truth, or the truth that grows from the ember planted in our hearts, I'm not so sure these truths are captured by analytical subtraction.

What does the story mean for us? Isn't that why we put the creche together each year? Because it means something, because it captures a rich and powerful truth for us? What does it mean?

Jesus is born in a shed. It's no accident. Later he says, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Luke 9:58) In one sense the whole story of Jesus is a story of, "No room! No room!" There is no room in Herod's world for him, or Pilate's world, or any world owned by the powers and principalities. In the manger Jesus takes up the role he will have all his life; Jesus is an outcast among outcasts.

So here is his birth in a shed. His parents so low in status that even for a mother-to-be in labor they are not given a room, but are sent to the stable. They are quite literally homeless. Jesus is the stone the builders rejected. Paul Nuechterlein says, "The real truth breaks in on you when you recognize the stone the builders rejected is the cornerstone."² There's no accident here. The story is explicitly telling us that the one who was rejected from the very beginning is the one who is the foundation of our faith.

It's why we build the creche, to tell this story. Look what we've done. How radical it is. We have taken the shed and the homeless family, and we have brought them into the church. The truth of our Christian commitment, the truth that this story has set us wishing for and the truth that has so warmed our hearts is the truth that here, in the church, there is room for those who elsewhere are shooed away. Not only is there room here, but they are the cornerstone of our

²I owe many of the insights in this and the next paragraphs to Paul Nuechterlein's analysis at: http://girardianlectionary.net/year_c/xmas.htm

faith. The creche says that here the rejected and the misfits, not only find an open door, they are also given seats of honor.

This cornerstone, this radical faith changes everything. It creates surprises galore. If Herod, Pilate, the innkeeper and a host of others rejected the inhabitants of our tableau, it is just as interesting who actually showed up.

The shepherds, of course. Shepherds are something of a mixed bag. Clearly, everyone knew that shepherds cared deeply for their flocks. When Psalm 23 says, “The Lord is my shepherd,” it means to say that the Lord is a loving and trustworthy guardian. Shepherds care for their sheep.

On the other hand there is some evidence that they were a lot like the cattle-herders in the old western shows. Marshall Dillon never looked forward to the cowboys coming into town with a cattle-drive. These cattle-drivers took great care of the cattle, but they were a rough and roguish bunch. They smelled bad. They swore and hollered. They had no manners. When they came to town, they were ready to party. They fully intended to overindulge in sex and alcohol. I think it’s fair to say that their first stop in town was not the church to talk with the minister. When they came into town, mothers pulled their children behind curtained windows. They didn’t want their boys becoming cowboys or their daughters getting involved with them. Marshall Dillon had all he could do to keep things under control.

So, now indulge me for a moment. Imagine, the cowboys are a few miles from town. The cattle drive is almost over. The partying is about to begin. Visions of, well let’s just say, it was visions of sugar-plums that were dancing in their heads. They can hardly wait. And then comes an angel of the Lord. The glory is shining all about them. The angel says, “Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. ¹¹ For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. ¹² And this *shall be* a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.” Now imagine further that the cowboys look at each other in amazement. They say to each other, “Man, we was going to party, but now we need to hightail into town and get to that manger and see this thing that has come pass that the Lord has made known to us. Come on boys; time’s a wastin’”

Yeah, right. Well, it is right. This is our story. Marshall Dillon and the rest of the respectable folk in town missed it. But the cowboys came the manger. That’s our story, and we’re sticking to it.

But that’s not the whole of it. Remember Matthew’s wise men? We threw them out of the manger, remember? Well, let’s bring them back in. The story doesn’t tell us much about them. But what is unmistakable is this, they are at the other end of the spectrum from the shepherds. The wise men have special interpretive abilities. They can see and understand the celestial signs. We have even come to think of them as kings – We three kings of Orient are. And in that sense they are the counterpoint to King Herod. King Herod understands the child Jesus as a potential political rival. Herod does everything he can to keep control, to maintain the status quo, including murdering all the children in town. The three kings from the East come to worship this child born homeless in the manger. The kings, who are at home in fashionable courts among the powerful, come to bow before the homeless and rejected child.

Both the shepherds and the Magi, then, act utterly out of character. The shepherds would ordinarily care less about a babe in a manger. And the magi, if they cared at all, would be expected to react like Herod. The shepherds and the magi are in the story quite simply because

they represent characters who are unlikely to be won by its truth. And to be won by the truth of the story means to be forever changed. T.S. Eliot's magi return to their old kingdoms, but they are no longer at ease in the old dispensation. Everything has changed for them.

Oh dear. I'm afraid I want to put the wise men back into the creche. They help tell the truth of the story, don't they? Well, how about the animals. Should we put the sheep and the donkey, the cows and the camels back in? Yes, I think so.

But where will it end? If we don't stick to the details of the story, what will guide us? If we let all these characters that weren't in the story into the creche, where will we draw the line? My God, I don't think we can. Oh my God, that might be the point.

Look at our tableau. We've got this rejected, unrespectable, homeless family in the center. We've brought them into the church. We've made them the centerpiece. We've said that the stone that is usually rejected is not only accepted here; it is the cornerstone; it is the foundation stone. And then we've added the shepherds and the magi, each unlikely for their own reasons. We've said you can be smelly cowboy or a king and be part of the story here, so long as the family in the manger completely changes who you are. Then the animals. I don't know. I just think they belong there. After all, some of them must have been there chewing on the hay. And the others like the sheep and the camels, well, they just ought to be with the shepherds and the wise men.

And what's the truth that comes rushing in on the wings of this idea? I don't know. I guess maybe it's trying to say that everything ought to be included in the tableau. The Gospel is all-inclusive, or something like that. This child and the truth of this story open their arms of loving acceptance to everyone. Not only that, this child and the truth of this story are capable of making anyone who comes into the story a new creation altogether.

I just thought of something. Somebody's missing. Do you know who? It's actually a lot of somebodys who are missing. That's right. We belong in the manger, too. We belong up there accepted and transformed by the truth it is and the truth it tells. We all belong in that story. We all belong in the manger. It's probably too hard to get us all up there physically this morning, but I want to ask you to bow your heads for a moment. [Away in a Manger] Imagine that you are there, in the manger, gathered around. Here you are loved and accepted. The shout of, "No room, no room," is but a faint remembrance. Here you hear in a whisper so as not wake the child, "Welcome. Come in." You are unsure of what it all means for you. Like Mary, you ponder it in your heart. You sense that everything is becoming new. The old dispensation is passing away. The glory of the Lord is shining all about you. It is bathing you in its warm light. It is calling you by name, and it is saying, "Welcome home. Welcome home." Can you feel the change it is working in you? Can you feel it? Amen.