



Christmas Eve 2020
Pastor Ann Hultquist

There's something about Nativity scenes that speak to our imagination, isn't there--Why else would they be offered in every kind of variation?

*Giant wooden, metal, or lighted figures for your lawn; intricate carved wooden figures of olive wood; Charlie Brown and Co. dressed up like the Christmas pageant and gathered around the manger; Fisher Price people that little ones can play with; and even nativities with the human characters replaced by bears, mice, and...dogs.

*In any case, they are often pretty much the same: Mary and Joseph, maybe an angel, shepherds, animals and three magi, all placed just so in a tableau with their focus on baby Jesus. It's a familiar scene in our minds as we worship today.

*This year, I saw a new nativity that really captured my attention. There are only 3 figures in it: Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. The artist who made it calls it "Let's let Mommy Sleep."

*Joseph is sitting down with the baby on his lap and a smile on his face; Jesus has his little arms thrown back above his head as infants do; and Mary is curled up beside them in a deep sleep

*Can you picture it? It's familiar in a different way, isn't it?--So much like *real life*: if you have been a new parent, or grandparent, an uncle or aunt, or even a babysitter, you know so well those muddled feelings of joy, exhaustion, wonder, and hope--sometimes hope and longing that the baby you are holding will just finally go to sleep!

*This kind of ordinary depiction was exactly what St. Francis had in mind in 1223 when he created one of the first “living” nativities in a stone grotto, with a cow, a donkey, and a baby lying in a wooden manger

*He wanted the average people he served to experience how Jesus entered the world--*their* everyday world. Townspeople came from all over to see the scene and hear the Christmas story.

*One of Francis’ friends wrote that some people were overwhelmed and knelt there in the woods, while others stood off to the side as if they just couldn’t quite take it all in.

I wonder what *you* are feeling tonight on this Christmas Eve? To say that it has been a hard year would be an acute understatement. It is likely the most difficult year many of us have lived through, both individually and collectively as the human family. We have ridden the rollercoaster of pandemic emotions: fear, worry, hopefulness, exhaustion, gratitude, and grief for all we have lost, and for some--grief for those they love who have suffered and died.

The virus came invisibly at first and then took and took and took everything that is our scaffolding around which we build our lives: work, school, gathering with family and friends, playing sports, singing, worshiping in person, traveling and on and on. Most of us are choosing not to be with extended family or friends tonight because it’s just not safe. Like everything this year, this Christmas Eve is so different. We might find ourselves thinking “If only...” and “I wish...”

*As we worship and listen tonight we bring all of that with us and more--You wonder if your faith should be stronger or your life more together and you wonder if any of these old carols about Jesus have anything to do with what you are going through. And yet here we are, watching, listening, wondering.

*What we hear tonight in Luke’s gospel is not some pristine, pretend fairytale but rather a story about real life: a tired couple with nowhere to go; an exhausting birth; the good news of God’s love announced to poor shepherds struggling to get by; and a baby, born into a world mostly unaware of his coming--God’s love completely enfleshed for the world--for us.

*The Bethlehem manger was just the right beginning to the life of a Savior who would reach out to touch those who were hurting and afraid and wondering; and who, on the cross, would open his arms to all, leaving no one--no one--outside the embrace of God's love. Christ will give, and give, and give grace upon grace.

*Surrounded by so much upheaval this year, the Christmas promise remains: in Jesus we see and know God as Emmanuel-- a name that means *God With Us*-- always with this world in all its complexity, hurt, and messiness, bringing gifts of hope, justice, and love.

*With *you*, wherever you find yourself in this moment: in joy, sorrow, doubt, awe or confusion.

*Can you imagine *this* scene: While Mary sleeps, Joseph beckons to you: "Come here. Come closer. This baby is for you."

* "Come and behold him," we sing, as if there were room for everyone in this Nativity...which of course, there is.