

"Nativity"
Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2: 1-20
December 24, 2011
Blacksburg Presbyterian Church
Dr. Catherine Taylor

Finally the time has come.

The waiting is over; we're at the manger bed.

Preachers are pressed this night not to say too much.

After all, we all know this story so well, and it is so beloved.

Loving a story can be a danger, too,

since often we don't see important things in stories that are familiar.

We know this is a story of wonder and joy,

with a child at the center, a child who is worshipped

by one and all, by shepherds and also by kings.

We also know that the setting is stark.

No matter how much we try to make the barn

a place of safety and warmth,

with lowing cattle and cooing doves,

it is still a place for animals, not people;

no fit place for a baby to be born, much less a king.

For Luke the starkness matters, is in fact the most important thing.

He wants us to see that this child is not born in circumstances

like those of the emperor under whose name the story begins

The emperor Augustus' birth was accompanied by portents and miracles, too,
according to the Roman historian Suetonius;

Augustus, too, was said to be the son of a god. ⁱ

So Luke gives us an angel host, a virgin mother mild,

and witnesses aplenty, enough to compete with any royal rival.

But the setting, the conditions, of this nativity,

are not up to emperor standards.

Instead they are the ultimate in contrast.

The word "nativity" is so associated with Jesus

that the first several definitions in any good dictionary will refer to only him.

You have to go down the list a bit to find that the word "nativity"

also means the condition of ordinary birth.

"Ordinary birth" are the exact words in the Oxford English Dictionary.

Not only are the conditions that surround Jesus' birth ordinary,

they are humble and harsh, coupled with a weary journey,

and no place for the couple but a barn.

Just how harsh the nativity story is

was well emphasized tonight at the family service.

We decided to have a service of Las Posadas,

which is Spanish for "the shelter" or "the Inns."

Las Posadas is a tradition that began sometime in the 16th century,
Children and musicians would go through their towns for nine nights
searching for a place for the baby Jesus to be born.
Each night they would go to a house and sing a traditional song
asking for hospitality, for a place to be welcomed in.
And each night they are refused.
The neighbors sing back a nasty, scoffing song
saying “We don’t like your kind, there is no place for such as you.”
Humiliation is part of the story.
On the final night they go to the church, where the doors are finally opened.
That’s what we did too, complete with traveling musician,
though the journey was one night instead of nine,
and involved the group going to two houses in the neighborhood
and two outside church doors.
Behind each door a willing volunteer
shooed the crowd away saying they were not welcome,
that there was no place for such as them.
Finally our children came back to the door of this sanctuary,
knocked and were welcomed in.
The space inside had been transformed while they were away.
A manager was set up in the Spanish style
with colored lights, paper flowers, flowing streamers,
As they entered the rest of the congregation welcomed them
shaking rice maracas and singing a welcoming song,
even a barn can be a haven, says this tale if true hospitality is there.
Las Posadas was new for us as a congregation, new for the children.
It was festive, it was moving.
But again, behind it is the stark contrast Luke cares about most
and that we want our children to learn:
God chooses to enter a world riddled with rejection
and layered with entitlements that still create deep pain.
Yes, God triumphs, but hostility and its effects are real.
In fact, one church member who was asked if we could use her house
for our Las Posadas circuit was deeply reluctant to say “yes.”
She didn’t want the children to associate her property
with the kind of rejection the tradition exposes to our view.ⁱⁱ
There was something so incredibly right about her hesitation
that it brought the Christmas message home forcefully to us on the staff.
All forms of entitlement no matter how slight,
are part of the darkness God seeks to overcome.
God enters the world this night as one of the least
in order to transform affronts and inequalities
of great and glaring magnitude, but also those
so commonplace we scarcely notice them anymore.

Some of you may have seen the documentary

released last year called "Babies."
With wonderful camera work and no dialogue at all,
it follows four infants from different parts of the world
from birth through their first steps around age one.
Ponijao, a little girl is born in Namibia, the youngest of seven brothers and sisters;
Mari, also a girl, is born in Tokyo Japan;
Bayar, a boy, is born into a family in Mongolia,
and Hattie is born in the US in San Francisco.
Three girls, one boy.
Two urban babies, two country babies,
two first world babies and two third world babies,
two babies with every kind of gadget imaginable
from high-end strollers to educational toys,
and two babies whose toys are chickens, rocks and sticks.
Yet all four infants have the most important thing:
families who love them and watch over them tenderly.
In fact, after watching the film for just a little while,
one begins to envy how completely the Mongolian and Namibian babies
are connected to the world around them
much more so than the babies surrounded by endless amounts of stuff.
A favorite moment for every audience is the scene
where Bayar sits naked in a shallow tub of water
A goat wanders in and sticks his head in the tub for a quick drink.
Bayar reacts hardly at all, while his mother gives a gentle laugh off screen.
The French director Thomas Balmes,
was surprised by the different ways
people have reacted to his film.
"In France, for example, some people saw it
as a kind of postcard with cute babies and nothing else...
In other places, they saw the film being about
our changing relationship with our environment.
In other places, it was about our relationship with materialistic stuff."
When I saw the film, I confess to thinking the two third-world babies
were almost fortunate to be free of the heaps of gismos
that cluttered the first-world babies lives.
All that stuff began to look ridiculous after a while.
But once outside the theater the fantasy began to fade.
For there is no question that for the two first-world babies,
sanitation levels are high,
all forms of medical care and dental care are moments away,
clean water and food are the norm, and education is a given.
Mari and Hattie can grow up to make films of their own,
be doctors or diplomats, engineers or artists.
Ponijao and Bayar's choices will be few
and their circumstances never as secure.
It will not do, especially tonight, to romanticize their poverty

or suggest they may be happier for leading simpler lives.

The late Pulitzer Prize winning author Frank McCourt
became famous late in life for his powerful memoir *Angela's Ashes*,
about his impoverished Irish childhood.

Again and again he was both astonished and incensed
to encounter people who spoke of his poverty as ennobling,
or the source of his story-telling ability.

He was quick to tell them there was nothing noble or artistic
about starving, seeing his infant sister die,
or being nearly blinded by constant conjunctivitis,
from living in the worst house of all
in a neighborhood that was already a wretched slum.

On top of it he and his brothers were tormented, bullied, and humiliated
by neighbors, teachers, and even priests, both for their poverty
and for having been born in America instead of Ireland.

It seems there is no misery on earth
that other people cannot make worse.

That is another thing Luke wants us to know.

There are people born with everything
who have the means to make other's lives better,
who do nothing but take care of themselves and their own.

But on this night, One born with nothing comes,
and he will do everything to lift the rest of us up.

All of us.

Not just the Bayars and Ponijao's of the world,
but the Mari's and Hattie's, too.

The angels do not say they bring good news to the poor,
or the downtrodden. There is no statement tonight
about those who welcome outsiders and those who do not.

The angels do not single out believers, or those who will go home tonight
without questions in their hearts
about what Jesus' nativity means.

Like the baby whose birth they are announcing,
Luke's angels do not make distinctions of any kind,
but say only that their news
is "good news of great joy for all people."
They leave up to us who hear this tale
to decide what to make of that.

Luke goes on to paint his picture of a manger bed,
where not only the parents and the baby are welcome,
but also poor strangers who come in out of the night.

The manger may be a harsh birthplace but it is without barriers.
The feeling of welcome in this tale has probably led
to many manger scenes like the ones in my house

when my children were young.
Over the years our crèche displayed not only wise men and shepherds
but plastic dinosaurs munching hay along with the sheep,
teenage mutant ninja turtles in the years when they were in,
a snowman, various Santas and countless other
plaster, glass or plastic people, creatures and things.
Children seem to know better than the rest of us
that the very ordinariness of this nativity means anyone can come,
tinker toy or FisherPrice policeman,
rubber elephant or paper origami swan.
Because this birthplace is humble it is open to one and all.
There are no barriers here, and never will be,
and no special places either, just a hollow in the hay
between a camel on the one side and Gumby on the other.
How much I would have liked to ensure that my children's lives,
all children's lives, Ponijao's, Bayar's, Hattie's and Mari's,
were as open and free of pecking orders of all kinds
as those childhood manger scenes.

If such a world sounds like some kind of fantasy to you,
perhaps you have not heard about what happened at the
Taj Mahal Palace Hotel in Mumbai.
That's the hotel that was attacked by terrorists in November 2008,
who invaded the hotel and held it for two nights and three days.
During the siege, not a single employee of the hotel fled the scene.
Every single busboy, waiter, and maid who knew the backs corridors
and could easily have fled, instead stayed
to evacuate all the guests they could.
They had been trained, of course, to care about the guests,
but could that account for telephone operators who refused to leave their phones
so they could contact guests and tell them what to do?
For the kitchen workers who made a human shield
behind which guests escaped while the workers lost their lives?
Business schools and teachers of ethics would like to know
just what it was about that work environment
that led the workers to behave so selflessly.
No definitive answers have been decided on
but one Harvard business professor looking into the case
found that the Indian family that owns the hotel, is deeply religious
and concerned with social justice;
typically they give two thirds of their profits to charity.ⁱⁱⁱ
They recruit bell hops and maids from only from suburbs and small towns,
asking local leaders to recommend people known for respect and empathy.
For managers they go to second tier business schools,
because the first tier graduates put making money above service.
They recruit for character, and reward employees for showing kindness.

It can't be proved that these practices resulted in the selflessness
shown during the attack, of course;
that would take a double blind study of some kind.
But the practice of avoiding what so much of the world regards as the best of the best
in favor of what is more lowly surely seems to be at work.

As I said before, I would have liked to give my children a world
more like their childhood nativity scenes.
I could not make the world such a place for my children
but the one born this night among the lowest can,
and does--and will again. And so we honor him.
Tonight is only the beginning.
The end lies at the table over there.
In between are all our days, and how we choose to live them,
as he did, or as others in his story do.
Every moment we can choose to be people of welcome
or people of hostility,
people who are ultimately concerned about rank,
or people who care little for such a truly random thing.
While you think it over, come to the
and table and find your place in the hay.
Perhaps you know that the word "manger" means "to eat." AMEN.

Let us pray:

*When the star in the sky is gone, the shepherds are back with their flocks, Lord help us bring
the meaning of this night to all--by helping to find the lost, heal the broken, feed the hungry,
release the prisoner, and make music in the world's heart. AMEN^{iv}*

ⁱ Apollo was said to have come to his mother as a snake. The Lives of the Twelve Caesars by C. Suetonius Tranquillus, available online from the Loeb Library, University of Chicago at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Suetonius/12Caesars/Augustus*.html

ⁱⁱ I am using this story with the permission of the member involved.

ⁱⁱⁱ These facts come from an article reported on by NPR published in Harvard Business Review.

^{iv} The closing prayer is based on a poem by theologian Howard Thurmond.