

## **Christmas Message 2018**

Rev. John Allen

One of my most enduring Christmas memories as a young child is setting up our creche. A musty cardboard box would come down from the attic, with a years worth of dust settled on top.

And inside, an ocean of tissue paper, each piece, each figure, delicately wrapped.

I remember reaching a hand in and feeling the first small solid shape, lifting it out and unfolding the paper to reveal a cow.

Then a sheep.

Then a Mary.

And an angel.

A wiseman carrying a chest of gold.

A little shepherd boy playing the bagpipes.

Piece by precious piece. The scene takes shape. Centered around the infant. Laying in the straw.

When we gather for the Christmas services, I feel that same sense of preciousness and reverence. As if we are unwrapping it delicately, to see it once again. Excited to see the familiar faces.

Ours is a faith of many stories.

But none shimmer and glisten quite like this one.

It is worth noticing that Christmas is the only story that gets this special treatment.

We don't have little dioramas of the Easter story in our living rooms. There is something about this story.

And of course this season is not so straightforward for most of us. Because over the years, other things have gotten wrapped up and put in that attic box. Losses. Grief. Broken hearts. Longing. Sadness. Or the feeling that the celebration is losing some of its luster, year after year.

Those too seem to come out this time of year, unbidden, unwelcome even. But just along with the lights, and the ornaments, those feelings, and those memories, visit us too.

Once, several years ago, I was teaching a group of second graders about the Bible. For one lesson, I wanted them to get a sense of where the Bible stories happened. So I put a big a map of the world up on the wall.

And I asked. Can any of you come forward and show me on this map where Jesus lived.

Isn't Jesus everywhere? One of them said. Yes, that's right. But, there was a time when Jesus was a person, like you and me. He was born. You remember the Christmas story? Can anyone point where that happened?

Silence.

And then one bravely raised her hand and said: "I don't think that happened here, did it?"

I don't blame her. That is one of the dangers in treating these stories the way we do. We make them sound so unbelievably unique that it is hard to imagine them actually happening in the world that you and I inhabit. It can kind of feel like another planet.

A few years ago an illustrator named Everett Patterson drew a beautiful contemporary representation of the Christmas story entitled Jose y Maria.

It is a scene at night, in the pouring rain, a pregnant woman in a grey hoodie is waiting nervously outside a 24-hour convince store. She is leaning up against one of those little coin operated animal rides. It is a donkey.

The sidewalk is littered with broken bottles and newspapers.

Jose is on the payphone, looking a little concerned. A hotel sign on the horizon flashes in stark red letters “no vacancy.”

The circular advertisements for beer and cigarette in the store window behind their heads creates halos.

And amidst the dreary scene, the only pop of color is a radiant green plant, pushing through a crack in the sidewalk. A tender shoot of new life, amidst a backdrop of hopelessness and fear.

It can be so tempting to take this precious story, and put it up on the shelf, where we can admire it from a safe distance.

To arrange the familiar characters delicately in the familiar way.

And when the season is past, to pack them back up into the attic.

But this Christmas story is not just a beautiful story to hear. It is not just a wonderful story to tell.

It is a story that lives in our world even today.

You may not know any shepherds, but can you imagine someone working the graveyard shift at a gas station, or cleaning an office building in the dead of night. What does it mean that God's presence on Earth in Christ was announced to them before anyone else? Could it be that those we might be tempted to forget, are the first ones God remembers?

And we certainly do not know any Maji. But we know that there are people and cultures in this world that are foreign to us. What does it

mean that when Christ was born in his own particular country, among his own particular people, the very first thing God did was put a star in the sky so that the gift could be shared with people from the other side of the world. Could it be that the boundaries between nations and cultures melt away in the presence of God's overwhelming love?

And we may not walk out the door tonight and hear the songs of angels, but Earth is still undeniably packed full of the miracle of God's presence, shining all about us.

And if we open our eyes to see Christmas in our midst. We will see the holiness in every person who does not know where they will lay their head tonight.

We will see that sacredness in the struggle of those whose options are limited and who make hard choices to save their children's lives. Mary would not have given birth where cattle were lowing, if she could have done anything else.

We will see that the greatest gift the world ever received, came on what probably began as the worst night of Mary and Joseph's life. Searching desperately through the crowded streets of Bethlehem.

And when you realize that this story does not just live in figurines on our shelves, but in our world. Then this story really comes to life.

Because all those other things in the box. The fear. The grief. The uncertainty. The doubt. The chaos. The longing.

Then you will realize that they are not strangers in the creche. They are not intruders in this season. They were there all along. The story always held them too.

And then you will know the true gift of this night.

The joy of Christmas is not that everything is all right. It is that God has come to set things right. That God has not left us alone. That God's devotion to this creation is so deep, that God would take on



the frailty of human life, and the vulnerability of an infant, to be that much nearer to us.

The joy of Christmas is not the last ornament, that perfects a stunning tree.

It is that little shoot pushing through the asphalt. Not the mighty crowing of our glory, but the tender beginning of our hope.

That the hardest things about your life. And the most terrifying things about this world. God was born in the midst of all of those. God came to us as a child. And God's express purpose was to arrive in the middle of all that. In the midst of all this.

To be with us.

To be with them.

To be with you.

