

The Nativity of our Lord Jesus Christ: Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2017  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 96  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20

At our Family Service earlier this evening, we introduced a new crèche. A NEW new crèche, I should say, to distinguish it from this one (here in Trinity), which is only two years old.

We felt we needed something different for the Family Service over at St. Helens Hall. We didn't want to transfer the nice one across the street between services. And, besides, the figures are delicate; children should not be allowed to carry them.

When we decided to get a new set, we came up with a "wish list": we wanted kids to let kids carry them without worrying they'd break them; we wanted the figures to be large enough for a big room; and, of course, we have aesthetic standards ... they had to be tasteful. (We are, after all, Episcopalians!)

I didn't think it was too much to ask. I was wrong. We could find durable. We could find large. We could find lovely. But we couldn't find anything that was tough enough AND large enough AND lovely, too!

But the bigger challenge turned out to be finding a complete set. We found sets with Mary and Joseph and the Baby Jesus. And an angel. Most had a sheep. Some had a cow and/or a donkey. And it was pretty easy to find sets with the three Magi. But, for all that, a surprising number of them failed to include any shepherds!

Well, in the end, we commissioned a local fabric artist (who just happens to be a member of the congregation) to create our crèche. And we're very happy with it. The figures are big enough. They're soft *and* durable. They're adorable and quite lovely.



And yes, everyone is there: Mary, Joseph, the Baby Jesus, a donkey, the Magi, a camel (named “Al,” for what that’s worth), an angel, AND some sheep and three shepherds, too!

So, as I say, we’re very happy about where we ended up.

But still, I’ve been puzzling over the question of why so many purveyors of nativity scenes decided that shepherds are somehow optional figures in a nativity scene.

Maybe they’re not flashy enough for a modern audience, accustomed as we are to fame and celebrity. I don’t know how else to explain omitting shepherds while still including the three kings – dressed up in their fancy robes with glittering threads, wearing fine crowns and bearing impressive gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh. (Shepherds are, by comparison, drab ... in their functional attire of beige and brown, bearing no gifts and wearing no bling.)

But that’s not the story of Christmas, at least not the way Luke tells it. The rich and powerful are passed over in deference to the drab and ordinary. So Luke speaks of Augustus, emperor of the Roman Empire, and of Quirinius, governor of Syria. And then he immediately shifts our attention to relative backwaters of Nazareth and Bethlehem. And rather than the regal halls of Augustus, “a stable-place sufficed” (as one of the old Christmas carols puts it) for Jesus’ birth.

And Luke tells us that God chose Mary to bear the holy child. Sure, we revere her now, but she’d have seemed a plain and utterly insignificant young girl in her time. She and Joseph were utterly dispossessed, obliged by a royal decree and an uncaring governor to travel far even in her condition. No one particularly cared about their health and safety. She gives birth in a stable, simply because nobody worried they deserved a second glance, let alone anything better than they got.

This is the theme of Christmas. And so an angel announces the good news of Jesus’ birth not to priests keeping watch in the Temple, but to “shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night,” The “multitude of the heavenly host” did not sing to entertain the well-heeled in Rome; they sang out in joy to shepherds.

It’s entirely absurd. First-century shepherds were outsiders and outcasts. They were nomadic, not to be trusted. Working day and night, with no time to bathe, they’d have smelled like sheep. Most folk thought them as dumb as the flocks they took care of.

And yet the angels came to them! And these same shepherds go to Bethlehem ... to “see this thing that has taken place” ... which makes them the first ones ever to seek Jesus out.

The first to seek him out, but they were hardly the last. That’s the story we hear all through the rest of the year after Christmas: it’s the story of the outcasts and sinners who sought Jesus out ... and of Jesus who sought them out, as well. And it’s the story of how Jesus was entirely comfortable with *their* sort ... because he was the *same* sort.

In the light of the bigger story of Jesus' life beyond his birth, it makes sense that the "important people" weren't there for that birth. But it makes no sense for shepherds not to be. So why would anyone leave shepherds out of a set for a nativity scene?

But then I wonder, "Who else is being left out?"

Nadia Bolz-Weber is a Lutheran pastor and gifted preacher. She tells a story about one day when she was helping out at a living nativity set out in a parking lot. Instead of a crèche filled with ceramic figures, this was a bigger scene filled with straw and live animals and people dressed up as Mary and Joseph and all the others. As she was helping one seven year-old boy get out of his shepherd costume, she asked him how he liked being a shepherd. "It was ok," he said, "but next year, I think I wanna be a pirate!"

It's absurd, of course ... just in case anyone is wondering; there were no pirates that first Christmas. But the absurd image got her thinking, all the same, about other absurd characters who have become part of our nativity scenes. She particularly hates it that someone thought the Little Drummer Boy was a good addition. Along with sheep and the goats, she's seen a pig in a nativity set – as though there were swine in a Jewish stable. She's most offended (though in this one case, I am not!) by what she describes as "those insufferable Nativities that include a pious little Santa Claus kneeling at the manger."<sup>1</sup>

They're all absurd and inappropriate, she admits, not to mention non-biblical. But who put us in charge of deciding who belongs in the scene and who gets left out?

My sister-in-law shared a photo on Facebook recently. It shows the crèche she has in her home. It's large and, shall we say, "expansive."



It doesn't take long to notice that there are a good many figures there that truly do not belong: Yoda there is ... along with Kenny from *South Park*, a Buddha, Gumby (the bendable green rubber guy), at least one "Day of the Dead" skeleton, and a couple of Santa Clauses (one of them blue). And they're all mixed up with (and in amongst) figures from a very traditional nativity set.

Disrespectful? Maybe. Possibly even irreverent. I allow that her nativity scene may be disrespectful and very possibly irreverent. But as soon as I allow that, I remind you that Jesus' critics said the same thing about him in his adult lifetime. And whatever might be wrong about the cast of thousands included in her nativity scene, it makes the point that though the stable where Jesus was born was small, the manger inside must be big enough to take in the whole world.

After all, the first who came to behold the newborn savior were, in their own day, deemed unsavory or tacky, some of them drab and dreary. That's why we should, so far as I'm concerned, always make sure we make room for shepherds.

And while we're at it, we'd do well to make room for a more diverse cast of characters in all of our nativity scenes. We should bring 'em – whoever or whatever they are – to our celebrations of Christmas ... if only to make sure there's room for you and for me.

For we are not, all of us, always appropriate. We are, too often, a motley crew. We don't have our lives together as we should – or as we'd like. Our hopes are dimmed by our fears, and our faith by our failings. All of which is to say we have no more right to expect God's affection than did an ordinary young mother, no more right to expect God's attentions than did shepherds.

But the whole of the Christmas story – and for that matter, the whole story of Jesus' life and death and resurrection – is told to assure us of God's love and abiding love and presence, all the same.

So I need shepherds to be here for Christmas. Because if there are shepherds here, there may be room for us and, so, we may have a Merry Christmas indeed.

---

<sup>1</sup> Nadia Bolz Weber @ <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2012/12/sermon-on-pirates-in-the-nativity-and/>.