

Infant Holy, Infant Lowly

Luke 2:1-14

Rev. Dan Schumacher

There's always so much pressure for everything to be perfect around the holidays, isn't there? The tree has to be perfect... the meal has to be perfect... the gifts have to be perfect.

The other morning, Christen and I were out walking the dogs. I was lamenting about how I still needed to write the sermon for this service, and I said, "I always feel like there is so much pressure to preach a really great sermon on Christmas Eve."

To which, my lovely wife of nearly twenty years, replied: "Well, it's like a wedding. At a wedding, no one cares what you have to say. They just want you to get to the part where they kiss. Christmas Eve is like that, Dan. They just want you to get to the part where they get to light a candle and sing 'Silent Night.'"

I said, "Well, if that was your version of a pep-talk, it failed miserably"

And she said, "I'm just trying to help take the pressure off."

It didn't help...

There are all sorts of pressures pushing down on us at the holidays:

- Who did I forget to send a Christmas card to?
- What should I get for the white elephant gift exchange at work?
- What will my crazy uncle say at Christmas dinner this year?
- Will my gift to so-and-so be good enough?

I don't know if you've kept up with the Christmas related news from around the world, but there is a story that has caught my attention, and for all the wrong reasons.

It turns out that every year Norway gives a Christmas tree to Britain. Each year, a Christmas tree is felled outside Oslo, Norway and sent to London's Trafalgar Square as an offering of thanks from Norwegians for Britain's support during World War II. This year's tree was an 80-year old Norwegian spruce measuring nearly 80 feet in height — a magnanimous gesture and gift, by any measure.

However, there has been a bit of controversy around the tree this year.

The tree, it turns out, is a bit of a mess. It is thin, asymmetrical, had several broken branches, and looks more than a little worse for wear. In fact, it looks so bad that Londoners started demanding that it be replaced.

As you might expect, Twitter exploded with comments about the shabby appearance of the tree, with several calling it “threadbare”, “half-dead”, or perhaps ill with COVID. Others said it was a symbol of the modern British decline or speculated it might even be an elaborate practical joke on Norway’s part.

When asked his opinion, seventy-year old, James Cranberry, said, “It looks like they kept and reused last year’s tree.”

Jasmine Smith tried to be optimistic and said, “It’s the thought that counts.” But we all know what that means. That’s also what you say when someone gives you an ill-fitting sweater that they hand-knitted themselves (Mckay and Russell, “Norway’s ‘threadbare’ Christmas tree present underwhelms some in Britain,” *Reuters*, December 2, 2021).

Despite the controversial nature of Norway’s gift, I think this story says something about our expectations for Christmas each year: we expect Christmas to be grand and are always disappointed when it turns out to be “not-so-grand.”

Not even scripture is exempt from grand expectations. The prophet, Isaiah, for instance, had grand expectations around the birth of the Messiah. He imagined it like this:

“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;
those who lived in a land of deep darkness — on them light has shined...
For a child has been born for us, a son given to us;
authority rests on his shoulders and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.
His authority shall grow continually, and there shall be endless peace
for the throne of David and his kingdom” (Is. 9:2, 6-7).

Wonderful Counselor? Mighty God? Unwavering authority? Endless peace? Isaiah seemed to think this child would come into the world like royalty — a throne just waiting for him, nations eager for his arrival.

But the gospel of Luke tells a very different story. Far from the halls of power — far from Emperor Augustus or the governor, Quirinius... not even in Jerusalem, but in the sleepy, little town of Bethlehem... not to a king, but to a carpenter... betrothed, but not yet married... swollen with child... no room in the inn, so born in a stable... no place to lay him down, so laid in a manger...

Jesus came into this world not sovereign and protected, but low-born and vulnerable.

New Testament scholar, Eric Barreto, says, “If Jesus were born today, he would likely be found in a tent city rather than the safety of a hospital” (“The ‘real’ war on Christmas?”, *Day1.org*, December 21, 2011).

“Infant holy?” Sure. “Infant *lowly*?” Most definitely.

An illegitimate child born to a single mom in a tent city isn't quite the grand thing Isaiah expected, is it?

You know, in preparation for this sermon, I read a long, mostly boring, academic article from a peer-reviewed journal about what was meant by Luke's phrase, "no room in the inn." It turns out that the meaning of the original Greek is unclear and, thus, thoroughly debated. (Kenneth Bailey, "The Manger and the Inn," *Theological Review*, November 1979).

I won't regurgitate the whole article for you — after all, I know you're only here to light that candle and sing, "Silent Night" — but I will share one important thought from it with you:

The Greek word translated as "inn" is not what we think of when we say "inn." It's not like Bethlehem had the historic Antlers Hotel at the end of Main St. Rather, an "inn" was more like a spare room at a relative's house. And in a small town like Bethlehem, Joseph would have had many relatives. He wasn't just told "no," he was told "no" by his own family.

Gregory Boyle says it like this: "We hear in the gospel, 'no room in the inn,' and we think *Motel 6* and no vacancies. But actually, Joseph went *home*. These were his people. So everyone who said, 'no' were probably blood relatives. They were cousins and uncles, and there was no room for the shame and disgrace of Joseph's fiancé, big as a house and ready to burst" (*The Whole Language*, chapter 6).

Friends, if that's true, then not only was the first Christmas Eve filled with disappointment, it would have been filled with heartache, too — his own family so ashamed of him and his pregnant fiancé that they wouldn't even let him in the front door. Go sleep with the animals, they said. Let your child be born there.

It's hard to put our minds around *that* version of the Christmas story, isn't it? Our versions are all so clean and sanitary. Our versions aren't about shame and rejection — just that the hotels were all filled up and so the "no vacancy" sign was turned on. We prefer Isaiah's version: regal titles, royal authority, everlasting peace. And instead God shows up in the mess... which I hope gives you hope because the truth is that we need a God who doesn't just show up when everything is perfect. We need a God who will show up in our mess.

My friend, Anna Tuckwiller, says it like this: "If God can put on skin, be born a poor refugee to a teenage mom involved in a bit of a sex-scandal with a working-class husband, in the midst of shady governments and murdered first-borns, with livestock for midwives and their unhygienic handlers the attending... If stars and angels can serve as social media birth announcements before some academics from the far East bring the oddest and most impractical gifts for a toddler..."

Then maybe it is not too great a thing for God to show up in our time and our mess.

If this is the the kind of sneaky way in which the One who spins the stars delights to make an appearance it seems that all of us, from the smallest barn gnat to the most noble of astronomers are invited, celebrated, and heartily welcomed to the gifts of being loved and of loving. And maybe, just maybe there are yet gifts of wholeness, healing, love, and light where they are most needed, least deserved, and wholly unexpected.”

Friends, I do not know where you hurt this Christmas. I do not know where you feel shame or how you have experienced rejection. I do not know in what deep darkness you walk or what great disappointment you face. What I do know is that the Christmas story testifies to a God who chooses to show up in the mess.

He was not born in the halls of kings, bestowed with titles and authority. He was born right smack-dab in the middle of a mess. And that is so often where he chooses to meet us.

For the last three months, a volcano has been erupting on the Spanish Island of La Palma. For three months, it has been spewing volcanic ash and lava, and thus wreaking havoc on the island’s residents. Rivers of molten lava have been running down the slopes, destroying banana plantations and burning down cities. Some 3,000 buildings have been destroyed by the blasts. Businesses and homes lost. The economy utterly destroyed. The air filled with ash. All hope lost.

What can the Christmas story possibly do in the face of such utter devastation?

A local Catholic priest and a geologist came together and decided that for Christmas this year, they would collect lava rock and ash from places all over the island that have been effected – the places that have been destroyed by the blasts or smothered by the ash. And, at the altar of the church, they set up the nativity scene on bed of lava rock and volcanic ash.

So, the cradle for baby Jesus is placed on chunks of black lava, while rocks form a backdrop for the scene and volcanic ash is scattered around the three wise men (Marco Trujillo, “Priest and geologist use volcanic ash for La Palm nativity scene,” *Reuters*, December 14, 2021).

Why set up the nativity like this?

Because Jesus comes to us in the mess. That is the whole point of the Christmas story.

You see, our weakness is God’s strength, and our emptiness means that there is room for God after all (Kathleen Norris, “Zealous Hopes,” *Christian Century*, December 12, 2005).

Merry Christmas, First Baptist Family. Merry Christmas.

Amen.