

“Where would the Christ child be born today?”

Westminster Presbyterian Church

Christmas Eve Service

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I love nativity scenes: the Christmas pageant when children don robes and shepherd crooks; the ceramic figurines we set up in our homes; the life-size display outside of churches; the live donkeys and sheep. As a kid, it quickly became my job to set up the nativity scene in our home; it was fun—like playing with religious toys. There was something enchanting about seeing God portrayed like any other kid.

Creche in French, presepe or presepio in Italian, the manger scene has become a ubiquitous part of Christmas. But it was not always so. Early nativity scenes in the medieval church were glittered with gold, silver, and jewels. It wasn't until the year 1223 that a nativity scene emerged that resembles anything like what we think of today.

It all began in a little Italian village called Greccio, on Christmas Eve. St. Francis of Assisi was preaching, but the village's small chapel wasn't big enough to hold all the pilgrims who had gathered. So Francis devised the idea of the first live nativity. In this scene, there would be no jewels; this is, after all, St. Francis we're talking about—the friar known for his life of simplicity, compassion, and poverty. Instead, Francis chose a nearby cave, where he set up a manger filled with straw and accompanied by a live donkey and ox. It is said that he was so overcome with emotion that he couldn't speak the name Jesus.

Francis wanted Christians to remember that Jesus was born in humble poverty, not riches.

In Luke's telling, Jesus is born to young, unwed parents, placed in a feeding trough, and surrounded by people who hold no political or financial power. Most scholars now believe that we've misinterpreted Luke's statement that there was “no room at the inn.” Instead of being turned away and forced to sleep in a stable, Mary and Joseph likely arrived at the home of a relative, only to find the spare bedroom already full of other family. They were probably then invited to sleep in a corner of the main room where livestock were also being kept. Far from a lonely scene, then, this nativity is filled with gushing cousins and aunts, all eager to hold the new addition to the family.

They have gathered because they have been compelled to do so by a foreign occupying power—Rome. This is no pretty scene. It's crowded. It's loud. It's impoverished. It's overtly political, with Luke calling Jesus “Lord” and “Savior,” titles reserved only for the emperor.

There are no visiting kings in this version—no frankincense, no myrrh, no gold.

Instead, angels appear to shepherds living in a field. They show up at Christ's birth stinking of sheep and wet grass, tracking in mud and singing bawdy songs. It's clear that they are supposed to remind us of another famous shepherd-turned-king, David, but they also represent the same sort of people Jesus will associate with throughout his ministry: outsiders.

Shepherds lived outside of settled communities and were not all that different from own undocumented farm workers; they were hired hands at the bottom of the social ladder. They were the folks who couldn't find any other jobs, doing the work no one else wanted to do. They were stereotyped as liars, degenerates, and thieves, grouped with tax collectors and prostitutes. They weren't allowed to testify in court, and many towns barred them from entering the city limits. They were looked down upon by the ultra-religious since their duties kept them in the fields 24/7 and thus unable to observe Sabbath, making them ritually unclean.

Bishop Craig Satterlee describes these shepherds as people who have spent so much time on the outside, "shunned by decent and religious folk, disappointed by God," that they've given up on religion and God.

*These* are the people to whom God sends angels. Maybe we know people like those shepherds; maybe some of us are like those shepherds. What good news it is that Jesus is born among those who need him most, among those whom the world has rejected but God has not!

Tonight, we have come to this sanctuary looking for Christ.

But—and as a pastor, I hate to say this—maybe we're in the wrong place. Maybe we're not supposed to be surrounded by these warm lights and greenery. Maybe we're not supposed to be in church, walled off from the world. Maybe we're supposed to be out there, among the homeless, in the nursing home, alongside the person fighting addiction, lining up with Muslims forced, like Mary and Joseph, to register their names and religion.

If we tonight want to hear the angels sing—just as they did to those shepherds so many years ago—maybe we need to find the places where people have lost hope and have gathered in the dark. If Christ chose to be born in such a politically conflicted, impoverished, and alienated space, where would he choose to be born today?

The truth is it probably wouldn't be here. Oh, Christ would eventually show up here; make no mistake. I will proudly note that immediately after the story of Jesus' birth, Jesus is presented in the temple and is later found there as a boy, talking with the teachers, in what he calls his "father's house." But maybe, we should stop going to church to find God, and start going to church to worship the God whom we have *already found* in the hurting places of the world.

That's the very idea that brought a church in 1976 to a maximum-security prison for its Christmas Eve service. No one was much excited by the idea, especially Janet.

Suddenly divorced, a single parent, raising two kids and holding down three part-time jobs, she had found that she wasn't welcome at her former, large, suburban church. The pastor had told her that she could no longer teach Sunday school or hold a leadership position because she was not "an acceptable role model." She had been devastated until she found this new little church, located in the inner-city, where people mostly wore jeans and T-shirts and happily and lovingly welcomed her and her sons.

It was this little church that took her on Christmas Eve to a nearby prison. But when they got there, they discovered that it was on lock-down and they would not be able to enter. So there they are, a small group huddling together, standing in the sleet and snow, in a prison parking lot, bound to wake up sick the next morning, and all she can think of are her old church's warm Christmas services with candles and trumpets and carols.

The group tried lighting the Christ candle, but the wind kept blowing it out. Janet then read from Isaiah, just as we did: "The people who walked in darkness have a seen a great light,... on them, light has shined." Suddenly, one of her sons tugged on her coat and said, "Mama, look!" As she turned and looked up, she saw rows and rows of flickering lights in the prison. In window after window, in cell after cell, she saw the glow of matches and lighters, their light spilling through the bars. Together, with the men in the prison, they all began to sing "Silent Night."

Janet says, "This was where I realized that I had missed what the gospel was about and what it meant to be a church."

Tonight, Christ is born. But not here.

Tonight, God is born in Aleppo, in Kabul, in the West Bank. Tonight, God is born in the prison down the street, in Chapel House among the homeless, in Auburn Community Hospital. Tonight, God is born in the hearts of those who didn't think they'd be welcome at church. Tonight, God is born in every poor and unloved part of our lives and world. Tonight, we run there with glee, just as those smelly, rough-mannered, beautiful shepherds did 2,000 years ago. **Amen.**