

Luke 2:1-20
December 24, 2019
Ellen Crawford True

Messing with the Story

A few short hours ago, all was bright but not all was calm in this place. We gathered for our family service where we sang the carols and told the story with toddlers wandering and babies squawking and siblings just barely managing to keep the peace. Exhausted parents and doting grandparents rested for a moment and savored the children's awe over the candlelight and the mystery that gathers around us every Christmas Eve. And it is all because of the story. You've come because of the story, too. Yes, you may be here because people are supposed to go to church on Christmas Eve or because you promised your mom you'd come or because you're here with your grandfather or because you did not want to be on your own tonight or because there is just something about a whole host of candles lighting up a darkened room. But all these reasons point to the story, the story that has been absorbed into our collective consciousness, the story that Linus tells every year from a quiet auditorium stage.

And we dare not mess with the story. At one point translators switched out "swaddling clothes" for "bands of cloth," but that just doesn't sound right to me. Scholars have been pointing out for a while now that we may have bungled the story a bit, that the baby's birth might not really go exactly like the carols say it does. They tell us that a house in early Palestine would have had a place for guests, an upper room in fact, and that the place where the animals were kept was not a barn on the other side of a field far away. When Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem, they would not have been cast out as strangers but welcomed as long lost cousins. And when we read that there is no room in the inn, it does not mean that the Hilton was overbooked or that the manager was heartless. Instead it means that the family guest room was

already occupied by other cousins in town for the empire's census, and that Mary and Joseph would have stayed in the family's own room, the very place where humans and livestock gathered at night together for warmth and protection. So Jesus wasn't born in a lonely far-flung stable, but in a crowded living room.

But hang on. It's one thing to say Mary wrapped Jesus in bands of cloth; it's another thing entirely to claim that my crèche gets it wrong, that the carols get it wrong, and that I get it wrong. That's messing with the story on an entirely different level. But is that bad news?

I don't think so. Yes, it shifts our thinking, but maybe it's not a bad thing. As another pastor points out that this means:

Jesus' birth story is not about rejection and isolation...[Instead] Jesus' birth story is about overflowing hospitality, where accommodations are made for travelers. Jesus was born in a very ordinary way, with peasants in a simple home. This is the story of Incarnation - that God is with *Us*, not just the Caesars of the world.¹

It also tells us that the first Christmas was crowded, that there was not simply a cow and donkey standing at a polite distance quietly observing Christ's birth, but that there were likely other children, bossy aunts, and maybe an elderly cousin or two. Jesus was born into a family, not an isolated family unit of three, but an extended and extensive family web of connections as well as squabbles, celebrations, opinions, favorites, and even grudges. There were probably some who had lost a loved one in the past year, others whose hearts had been broken, and still others who felt in the way or overlooked. My guess is that not all was calm and bright at every moment, if at all. The extended family was in town because of an order from an occupying empire, which would naturally have folks on edge. So toes were most assuredly stepped on and feelings were

¹ https://www.pulpitfiction.com/narrative-notes/christmaseve-y6k8e?fbclid=IwAR0jF_FJJC4_OTnQLeraTZ-ZPZaJWlcYIIC0ExqE6LJyGbnl5DqW6_1-u6M

most decidedly hurt. Maybe there were even whispers about Joseph and his pregnant wife. And it is there that the Christ child was born, into the messy, anxious, crowded thick of it all.

My friend Cecily posted a photo recently of her crèche. As children her brother and she received a new mismatched animal to place around the crèche each year. The scene now includes everything from “a pinky-nail sized glass mouse to a carved wooden rhino.”² And it is a jumble of figures from all over the world. If they were to come to life the mouse might scurry under the rhino’s foot, making the elephant nervous. The dignified camel might get a bit irked with the squawking geese and the snuffling pig. And there is Jesus, in the midst of it all, insisting that there is always room for one more.

Yes, it changes the story a bit, at least the story I thought I knew. It pushes me to imagine Jesus’ birth in a bustling overcrowded family room instead of a sweet serene little stable, but that might be some of the best news I’ve heard in a while. Because I need a Jesus who is truly God with us, not God tucked away at arm’s length keeping a safe distance. The world in which I live is one where very little is serene, very little is calm, only rarely are things purely bright. I need, we need a Savior who is in the thick of the brokenness of our families, in the midst of our heartbreak and despair, right smack dab in the middle of all the ways we hurt each other and fall short and step on one another’s toes. And by the grace of God, that is the very one we get.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

² Thanks to my dear friend Cecily Craighill Davis for giving permission to use her story. Her photo will be posted on Facebook with the sermon.