

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

December 24, 2022

Embodied Divinity

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Sisters and brothers, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

As I noted a couple of weeks ago, we have this tendency to try to avoid things that make us uncomfortable. We like to project an image to the world of success and respectability. But the problem with that tendency is that we can come across as inauthentic or at least naïve. This predilection doesn't just apply to how we present ourselves to the world, however, it can also affect how we present the Gospel message to the world as well. And if there's one thing we should avoid, it's doing anything to weaken or negate the power of God's good news.

I suspect many of you have already received and/or sent out Christmas cards. I also suspect that a great many of the cards in circulation right now present the birth of Christ in a very...sanitized...way. Most of the cards I see show an amazingly well-put-together holy family along with tall and handsome shepherds, exotic looking wisemen, and remarkably clean animals. It's a very pretty scene, but it's also a total fiction. And I think it's important for our understanding of who God is and what God values to acknowledge the reality of God's story.

If God had wanted to circumvent the normal way of things, I'm sure God could have. Baby Jesus could have floated perfectly down from the heavens to delicately alight in Mary's lap. Or it all could have occurred in the midst of comfort and opulence if that's how God wanted it to happen. But that's not the reality of the nativity, and I think that says something powerful about God and about the mission and ministry of Jesus Christ.

So let's get real. The nativity was likely dirty and smelly. The whole scene took place in the midst of animal stalls and feeding troughs. I witnessed the birth of both of my children and even hours afterwards my amazing wife was tired, disheveled, and very much still recovering from a miraculous, but let's

be real, somewhat traumatic event. Mary would not have looked like so many paintings and cards depict her – well coiffed, clean, and beatifically serene.

The wisemen and shepherds? They would have been travel stained and tired. They likely would have smelled less than great. The birth of God's Son occurred amidst dirt and manure, spilled grain and cramped spaces (common dwellings in villages like Bethlehem were not large). Nothing about the reality of the birth of Christ was clean or sanitized. And God willingly participates in this dirty, less-than-ideal reality.

I don't know about you, but I need to be reminded of this willingness of God. God is perfectly willing to get dirty. God is willing to interact with lepers and tax collectors. God doesn't seem to mind blood and sweat and tears. God sees humanity struggling in the grime and chaos of life and what does God do? God jumps right into that grime and chaos. God willingly takes on human flesh and form, human brokenness and limitation. Why? Out of a stubborn and passionate love for us. *Hesed* in the Hebrew and *agape* in the Greek, but both words for love indicate a steadfast, obstinate, and unconditional sort of love.

And God chooses all of this. God chooses to enter into our reality. God chooses limitedness. That fact routinely boggles my mind. And not just **my** mind either! The Psalmist shares this same astonishment in Psalm 8:4, "what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?" Frankly, we should be so far beneath God's notice that we're not even a blip on the radar.

Think about that fact, think about how great our Creator is. How powerful is God to have spun the universe into being? How amazing is the one who crafted the pillars of creation in the Eagle Nebula? How incredible is the divine spark at the center of each atom? It makes me think of that scene in Disney's animated movie, *Aladdin*, in which Robin Williams' genie describes his difficult reality, "Phenomenal cosmic power, itty bitty living space."¹

We could say much the same about God incarnate in Jesus Christ. Phenomenal cosmic power...itty bitty baby. This is what boggle my mind. God willingly chooses to do all of this. Be born. Grow up. Be subject to all of the vagaries of childhood. Experience skinned knees and getting teased. Learning and developing. Getting dirty and sick. Navigating adulthood.

¹ Clements, Ron, and John Musker. *Aladdin*. Buena Vista Pictures, 1992.

Knowing hunger and fear and even pain. Living the full range of human existence, both the good and the bad.

All out of love for us. God chooses all of this because God loves us. More deeply and more passionately than we can ever truly conceive. I can think of no greater proof of this amazing love than this: God takes on humanity. Our limitless God chooses limitation. Our omnipotent God chooses weakness. Our omnipresent God will be subjected to the bounds of time and space. All this out of love for us.

This is the miracle of Christ's birth...embodied divinity. That which is not mortal takes on mortality. Out of deep and abiding love. The sort of love that is active and engaged. God is not far off and aloof. The promise of the Incarnation, the promise of Christmas is that **GOD IS WITH US!** Always and forever God is with us. No matter where we might find ourselves, even in the darkest pits of hell, **GOD IS THERE!**

Imagine that! God cares enough for you, God loves you so completely that God not only notices you, but God will do anything to be with you. God will do whatever it takes, like a desperate parent, to get to you. Let that sink in. Rest in this thought: God loves you more than you can ever truly know. God thinks you're amazing enough to stoop all the way down to wherever you find yourself to say "I'm with you, always and forever, no matter what!"

I'm willing to bet you need to hear that. And I'm willing to bet you know of others who need to hear it too. That is our calling, to share this amazingly good news, this Gospel message. We share it in words, certainly, but we also share it in deeds. When we see someone struggling, and we're equipped for it, we can be God's loving engagement with them. We can join them too in the muck and mire of their lives. We can love them where they're at. We have the privilege of being God's hands, feet, and voice in this world. Saying to all we encounter, you are loved, you are not alone, you matter. What greater message could we offer? Amen.