

Christmas Eve Sermon
The Rev. Megan Dembi

Driving around town, I'm guessing most of the people here have seen at least a few nativity scenes over the last month. Whether those scenes were made of blow-up lawn decorations, carefully rusted metal figures, or even live people and animals, there is something all of these scenes have in common—they're cute; they're nice; they're happy. And this makes sense because most of what we see in our country around Christmas time is cute and nice and happy. We can watch marathons of Charlie Brown and Snoopy learning about the true meaning of Christmas and Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer getting recruited by Santa to save Christmas. We decorate our houses with trees and ornaments and lights. We get together with family and friends and have a wonderful dinner with turkey or ham and all the fixings. So much of Christmas is cute and nice and happy.

And to a certain extent, Christmas should be cute and nice and happy. After all, we are celebrating the birth of our savior. We are celebrating the day that the Christ-child, God-incarnate conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit within the Virgin Mary, is born into this world. And because Christ is not only fully God, but also fully human, we can safely guess that the baby Jesus, like most babies, was probably adorable. And this was certainly a nice and happy occasion. But to view the story in this way doesn't really serve it justice.

Because Christ, our Savior came into the world, did not come into the world in a glamorous or fantastic way, despite his miraculous conception. In fact, the Savior and Redeemer of the world, our Christ and King Eternal, was born into this world under wretched circumstances. Mary was heavily pregnant when she and Joseph were forced to travel to Bethlehem to be counted in the census. When they finally came into town, they learned that there was no place for them to stay. So the innkeeper, not wanting them to be forced to somehow spend the night with no protection, offered them to stay in his stable. His STABLE. Those of us who grew up around animals know that a stable isn't a cute, nice, happy little barn filled with hay where a few fluffy sheep roam about once in a while. Though we do not think much about this when we consider the story of Christ's birth, stables can be disgusting. I watched a short video of children trying to retell the Christmas story the other day, and one little boy described the scene in a way that I think is much more accurate than the way most adults imagine the story. When asked to describe what the stable was like, the little boy, giggling, said there was probably a lot of animal poop. And considering that Christ, God-incarnate, was born in a stable, that little boy was probably right. Though this event was miraculous, it was far from elegant. And Mary and Joseph, though they rejoiced over the birth of Jesus, probably were not terrible happy about the circumstances of his birth.

And even before Jesus was born, his life and the lives of Mary and Joseph were not simply cute and nice and happy. Before Christ was born King Herod had made a precedent of killing people, even infants, when he felt they threatened his rule. And when Herod caught wind of Jesus' impending birth—the birth of a miraculous child whose birth was long-foretold, Herod planned on killing Jesus. Luckily Herod's plans were foiled and the Christ-child lived to adulthood, but a story cannot be considered to be just cute and nice and happy when an infant's life is at stake, let alone if that infant was to be the savior and redeemer of the world. No, even when Christ was a small baby, there were those who were threatened by him, who hated him, who wished him harm. In spite of the fact that Christ did nothing but good, there were still people who wanted to get rid of Christ. And eventually they succeeded.

So why didn't God the Son just come down as the prince of a powerful family? Why was Christ born in a disgusting stable instead of a beautiful palace? Why did Christ grow up learning the trade of a carpenter rather than growing up rich enough to never have to engage in physical labor? Because God was made man specifically to share our humanity with us—to be born, to live, and to die

as one of us—and to be resurrected. God coming down and being born a vulnerable infant in the lowliest of circumstances was one of the greatest things that God has ever done. By his coming down from heaven and being made a human that would be born of a human woman, he freed us from sin and death, ensuring we will be forgiven for those times when we act wrongly, and that, like Christ, who rose victorious from the grave, we will one day rise to eternal life. And though Christ could have made this sacrifice for our since if he had been born to a wealthy and powerful family, that is not how God operates. God-incarnate instead chose to come to earth in the form of the child of poor parents, who were forced to give birth in a stable, so that Christ himself would not only know but would experience what it is the least of society experienced.

This doesn't sound so much like the cute, nice, and happy version of the Christmas story that we most often think of, but God didn't come down in human form to make us "happy". Because being happy is temporary, fleeting, shallow. Christmas is not about being cute, or nice, or happy, but it is about joy. The Isaiah reading tonight describes this joy. It's the kind of feeling that someone feels when, after walking in a land of deep darkness, they finally see light. The feeling that comes when a person's yoke of burden is lifted and the rod of their oppressor is broken. It's the joy that comes from knowing that, because this Christ child was born for us, whatever circumstances we face in this life, we can take solace in knowing we are freed from the bondage of sin and have become inheritors of everlasting life. That is joy. And joy is different than happiness because joy abides. Happiness comes from present circumstances, but joy comes from our overarching reality. Whatever the circumstances of our lives, we are a people of joy. We are a people saved, a people freed from sin and death, a people who have been given the gift of eternal life. It is because of this joy that we don't need to live shallow lives out of fear. We don't have to focus our lives on obtaining material things that will one day pass away, thinking that those things are what are truly of value in this world. Because the gift that we have been given is not temporary, but eternal.

As appealing as the cute, nice, and happy version of the Christmas story may be, it cannot match the joy that we encounter when we think upon the true story of Christmas. Of Mary and Joseph facing fear and persecution, of Herod's violence, of God being born as a vulnerable infant who, from the very beginning faced threat of death. Of Christ, fully human and fully God being born into the world to live and die as one of the poorest of us and to be resurrected, conquering sin and death and opening to us the way of everlasting life. As we celebrate the birth of our Savior, let us think and pray upon the circumstances of his birth, the struggles that Mary, Joseph, and Christ himself faced, and the true story and meaning of Christmas.