

Christmas Reflection
inspired by *Something More*¹ by David Lose
December 24, 2016
Rev. Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

We have gathered all over the city tonight to enact this ritual. It's the highlight of our Christmas season when we lend each other the light of our candle and wistfully whisper-sing of heavenly peace together. Some congregations even have real donkeys and sheep in their sanctuaries right now while children are dressed in bathrobes with pieces of fabric secured around their little heads. We tell the story tonight that we so desperately want to hear told: a kind, young woman honors the voice of God; a good, honest man honors the urging of the angel; a sweet, smiling baby is born in the cozy, simple manger with well-groomed animals (more household pet than farm work source) and all of them remind us that everything is going to be just fine. Do not be afraid.

It's a good word, and certainly scripture backs up that message—do not be afraid. Do not fear. It's right there in every telling of the birth of Christ. But there's more to it than that, and I don't just mean the warp speed path to Easter that too many Christians see as the logical conclusion to the birth we celebrate this weekend. Right here in this moment, with an infant Christ—an incarnate God—before us, there is more than just a call to not fear.

Because that call isn't just "don't fear the world as you know it and the broken parts of your life as you know them." The call to not be afraid is also anticipatory. Don't be afraid of what is happening in front of you. Do not fear the invitation of the nativity, the call to follow a God who seeks you out, the mandate to love as the baby before you is about to show you how to love. You see, you're going to think it's impossible. And you're going to truthfully acknowledge that it's sometimes uncomfortable, and every now and then you're going to want that baby Jesus to stop talking and just be quiet because he is going to ask you to walk away from some (much?) of the life you cling to for security. But don't be afraid. Do not be afraid.

In his commentary on Luke's birth narrative, pastor and writer David Lose suggests we Christians photoshop the nativity to make it prettier and sweeter and cleaner than the story actually reads. Like a beautiful filter on our phones, we smooth out the blemishes and fine lines and crop out those qualities we'd rather not see. We do so for our own protection because, like the shepherds and like Mary and like Joseph, we sense our

¹ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=1612>

own fear that something about this story might ask too much of us. And we're already exhausted enough from our own lives; the last thing we want is a demanding baby to poke around and change everything.

"Day to day, we [work] to keep pretty turbulent lives in tact, to stem the tide of chaos that too often threatens to overwhelm us at home or work or in the world at large. We've had enough 'realism' in the news, [particularly this year] thank you very much. Can't we at least come to church for a vision of something that is inherently and undeniably good, pure, beautiful?"

I get it. I'm with you. I'm weary, too, and "I actually think [asking for a vision of something good and beautifully is] a pretty understandable request. We put a lot of time and energy into managing things, controlling as many of the variables of our twenty-first century lives as possible, and frankly are nearly worn out by the effort. Little wonder we come to church wanting not just a respite from the frenetic pace of everyday life but something more, something comforting and comfortable, something, preferably, warm, cozy, and inspiring. And so we devour Luke's nativity scene like it's a kind of spiritual comfort food...for the beleaguered soul.

Except, well, that's not exactly "Luke's nativity scene. Luke knows something about wanting to order chaotic lives, too. In fact, his story begins just there, naming upfront the rulers of this world who were responsible for maintaining -- and enforcing! -- the [illusion of peace]. Moreover, Luke sets his story amid a census, the act of ordering -- that is, registering, counting, and taxing everyone... Yet this is only background for Luke," writes David Lose, "the main action takes place elsewhere, on the fringe, far away from the centers of power, in a little backwater town called Bethlehem, where a scared young girl and her equally scared husband can't find any decent place in which to birth their first child and so are forced to take refuge with animals, with only dirty shepherds and their even dirtier sheep to notice.

Why does Luke tell his story this way? Even more, why does God do it this way? I actually think it -- this whole story -- is an indictment of the order, an accusation against things as they are. Do you know what I mean? Let me try to say it another way: I think that by playing out this redemptive story on the fringe of things, just where you'd least expect God to be, God is telling us that the way things usually are *just isn't good enough*. It's almost like God is whispering to us something that deep down we know already but are afraid to admit, even to ourselves: these lives we've so carefully created, this world we work so hard to manage, are beautiful, precious, and wonderful ... but also vulnerable, fragile, and ultimately insufficient."

It's into the vulnerable, the fragile, and the ultimately insufficient that Christ is born. The details of this story matter. The place of the birth matters. The human parents tasked with raising the Christ definitely matter. The stench and the lowliness and the quiet of this birth matter. You see, as this story goes, "God comes not at the center of the world to straighten things out a bit, but on the fringe to call the orders and structures of the day into question and herald a new beginning altogether. Ultimately, Luke's story -- if we're willing to listen -- witnesses to the simple yet scary fact that God didn't come in Jesus to make things a little better, a little more bearable. God came to turn over the tables, to create a whole new system, to resurrect and redeem us rather than merely rehabilitate us.

It's scary because we've invested a lot in our lives as they are and it can be down right frightening to give up what we know. But at the same time it's thrilling because this promise speaks to a place deep down inside each of us that wants something more, something more than a better job or higher income, something more than a more comfortable home or enjoyable retirement. These things may all be good, but they don't save; often enough, they don't even satisfy for long. No. We desperately want a sense of meaning and purpose, we desire to believe that there is more to this life than [our days often reflect], we need to hold onto the hope that despite all appearances we are worthy of love." And as this story before us unfolds, not only do we discover we are so absolutely fully known and fully loved, we come to realize we are created and shaped by Love itself and called to carry that Love into the world with our lives like flashes of light in the deepest darkness.

"And so God comes at the edges of the story and [the edges of] our lives to speak quietly but firmly through the blood, sweat, and tears of the labor pains of a young mother and cry of her infant that God is irreconcilably *for* us, [Emmanuel—God is with us]—joined to our ups and down, our hopes and fears, and committed to giving us not just more of the same, but something more. Christ comes, that is, not just to give us more of the life we know, but new and abundant life altogether. For in Christ we have the promise that God will not stop until each and all of us have been embraced and caught up in God's tremendous love and have heard the good news that 'unto you this day is born a savior, Christ the Lord.'"

Yes, the story we read and tell and sing tonight is calling you and me to a life that asks quite a lot of us. But do not be afraid of reading and telling and singing the story just exactly as it is. You see, it is with aches of shame and sadness that I am shedding the photoshopped, cropped and filtered Jesus story because I stand here as a leader of a long tradition that hasn't always asked a lot of its adherents. We clergy folk haven't sufficiently called people to honoring, following, and living into the radical way of

Christ. As the dear Franciscan, Father Richard Rohr writes, "Christianity is a lifestyle--a way of being in the world that is simple, non-violent, and loving. However, we made it into an established religion (and all that goes with that) and avoided the lifestyle change. One could be warlike, greedy, racist, selfish and vain throughout most of Christian history and still believe that Jesus is one's 'personal Lord and Savior' or continue to [participate fully in the life of the Church as a member] in good standing. The world has no time for such silliness anymore. The suffering on earth is too great."

And so it is, my friends, that I ask each of us to look fully on the birth of Christ and see in it the great hope, the tremendous love, the promised peace, and the unending joy that this child offers us today. Not given like presents beneath a tree, but promised and worked for together, as partners and co-creators, to be born into the world through our lives. Do not be afraid. Behold, I bring you good news. A child has been born.

A child has been born who tells us we are not alone. A child has been born, not in the center of power to rise to the thrones of human kingdoms but in the quiet, unnoticed margins. A child has been born who will speak to the heart of what you call unlovely and instead call you beloved. A child has been born who will reshape the whole earth, if you will join him in the work. A child has been born who calls you to carry light in darkness, make peace where war is commonplace, and love so radically that this old world is made over like a brand new one. Do not be afraid but believe the good news of God. Amen.