

Christmas Eve Sermon | December 24, 2020 | Knox-Metropolitan United Church

An Emperor makes a declaration and a force of history is unleashed – mass migration across the known world, and a family, like thousands others, must leave a home unsupported, travelling from one town that can be found on a map to another.

A young woman feels a quickening within as a biological process ignites, one from which each one of us emerged onto this planet.

A frightened couple search for a safe place, for refuge, for asylum, and find closed doors and cold stares, until unlikely sanctuary is opened by those with the courage to embody compassion, and answer a call to radical hospitality.

Divine life enters earth in the midst of human interdependence, bonds of family, and chosen community, reminding that us that connection is holy!

Divinity embraces fragility and vulnerability – eschewing dominance to be breastfed and snuggled, to cry and to be held – to need, to be powerless, to accept help.

The simple and impoverished are welcomed with heavenly choirs while the rich and the wise ones must leave their spaces of power and learning before they may come face to face with what has come to be - guided by the primal wisdom of fire in the night sky.

These particularities call us to pay attention – not to verify historicity or accuracy, not to argue one way over another, but to pay attention to the particularities around us today.

To the political forces that uproot the unnamed, the poor ones and humble, the ones furthest from the proclamations yet most profoundly affected, the places where safety is hardest find, the bodies ignored and used.

Nativity calls us to pay attention, to the bodily and the earthy, to the knocks on the door and the requests for help, and the forces that keep some of us safe and millions displaced.

While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

I wonder what you picture here.

Perhaps “the inn” appears in your mind like something from the Flintstones cartoons a rustic Radisson.

It is always worth remembering that we encounter Scripture across a gap of time, space, and culture.

In the Jewish Palestinian world from which this story emerges, an inn is not a licensed establishment, part of a prototypical hospitality industry.

An Inn, in the Greek language the Book of Luke was written, *Katalyma*

Means a guest room.

A typical early 1st century home in Palestine under Roman rule looked like this...

The main family room.

A guest room (this is a culture in which hospitality is so central that it shapes the architecture) would either be at the back or on the roof.

And a space for the animals.

Its our modern context to imagine animal and human separated in such way.

But this is not a barn or shed out back, but a lower level of the the main room.

Sarah Bessey points out...

So the story is actually one of hospitality - the home where Mary and Joseph stayed was not a guest room but ***an actual family room***. They were welcomed into the family's quarters. They weren't even in the guest room but in the main room of the home.

Our nativity and crèche sets, while sentimental, play to our cultural biases and redirect us from the connectivity embedded within the details of this story.

Over the last few years, we've added unwritten characters into the interactive version of this story that we tell at Follow Yonder Star, our Children's Christmas Eve Service.

Particularly, we've added the midwives.

Their presence don't make it onto the pages of the Book of Luke, but their absence from the narrative on the page, makes their presence in our hearing all the more poignant.

Like the midwives in the Exodus story who courageously defied Pharaoh's orders to cast male Israelites into the Nile, like the *hameyaledet* who attend to Rachel in Genesis, and in other key moments in the Hebrew Scripture, surely the women of Bethlehem, the women who were on the road with Mary and Joseph on the journey from Nazaerth, attended the birth.

They brought their wisdom of the body, the earth, plants, their stories of the matriarchs, and heroines of their people.

Again, Sarah Bessey...

The Christmas story isn't one of loneliness and quiet isolation in the darkness. This is a story of welcome and hospitality, of lamplight and family, of birth in all its incredible sacred humanness, entrenched in a culture and in a time and within a family.

What a difference this makes.

When we re-frame this story as the divine being expressed in that incredible sacred humanness, entrenched in a culture and in a time, I believe we are guided by this story into a deeper engagement with the humanness of our own lives and world.

This story invites us to seek the divine not only in the sublime, but in the ordinary.

As we speak this story, human words to human ears, the telling becomes a practice in celebrating connection as holy!

Then as Those who dream...may the specificity and the humanness.

The geography

The biology

The ethnography

Of this story

Challenge us to dream rooted dreams for this world.

That peace would come to places on maps

That real human bodies would be fed and cared for

That cultures of beauty and stories be welcomed to bring their divine gifts to bear

For tonight we are those who dream.

We are not alone

We live in God's world