



December 24, 2006

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Luke 2:1-10

“Where is your place in the Stable?”

Tonight we have gathered to remember and celebrate a mystery that happened on a cold, starry night long, long ago. We remember that God came to us in a tiny child, born in a shelter for animals to a young couple far from home. This is a holy night, a night when we stop in the hushed stillness of winter to search for the message that long ago event might have for us today.

There is a cartoon I have treasured for many years, that speaks to me of the meaning of Christmas. The cartoon does not include any artistic renderings of Bethlehem, angels, shepherds or the holy family. The cartoon is one of the For Better or For Worse series—and you can tell it’s very old because Elizabeth, the family’s older daughter, now a young adult, is little, probably in early elementary school.

Elizabeth is visiting her uncle, a farmer, and is chatting with him while he works out in the barn.

You putting hay down for the calves, Uncle Danny? she asks.

Yep, is his concise reply.

Jesus was born in a barn like this, wasn’t he! With cows an’ lambs an’ chickens, Elizabeth continues.

Sure was, responds Uncle Danny.

Uncle Danny? asks Elizabeth.

Uh huh, says her uncle as he totes a heavy bag of feed.

Raising her face to her uncle's and looking deep into his eyes she asks a final question: *Did it smell this bad??*

Uncle Danny, at this point, has no reply, just a startled, wide-eyed expression.

We've heard the Christmas story so many times. We cherish the reading we heard from Luke's gospel. It brings memories and feelings of warmth. It has a picture-book quality. We can treasure that beauty and ALSO open our minds to expand our vision—to include MORE elements of the real events on that first Christmas night.

The wonderful, magnificent, holy, sacred reality of God's presence WAS in that little stable. God was present RIGHT IN THE MIDDLE of the dusty floor, the travel-grimed and weary Mary and Joseph, and in the sights, sounds and SMELLS of the animals nosing the hay in the manger.

Friends, it did smell in that stable. Just like it sometimes smells to high heaven in places we travel through on our journeys through life. The Christmas events assure us that God is not far away, EVER, not even in the smelly places. The glory of the Lord, shining as a bright light, sung by the angels and told by messengers from God, appears right smack dab in the middle of whatever life brings.

Let's picture the scene in that stable Christmas night. Who was there? Who were the characters? Who might correspond to those folks today? Can we be part of that scene? Can we find our place in that stable?

Who were the major players the night Jesus was born? The shepherds were there, right? They were out in the fields watching over their flocks by night. Shepherds in Jesus' day were not high class folks. They were not allowed to give evidence in court. They weren't considered reliable. They were rough people, outsiders, barely getting by, making it from day to day. They were suspicious of the important folks in their culture, who frowned on them and kept them at a distance. Actually, they didn't hold too much with God; God was seen as powerful and punishing. AND THEY WERE THE FIRST TO RECEIVE GOD'S GREAT GOOD NEWS OF THE BIRTH OF JESUS THE CHRIST.

Who might take the place of shepherds in the stable tonight? We might think of truckers out on the highways, taking a break at an all-night stop, a place that's stayed open for them, even on Christmas night. Tex Sample, a United Methodist pastor and professor has written about folks he calls "hard living" people. They've had a rough life, talk tough, smoke, drink and gamble and "look for love in all the wrong places." Tex Sample is challenging today's church- saying, "Why aren't these folks in our faith communities? God spoke to them FIRST, when he came to live among us!" The shepherds remind us they have an important place in the stable.

Actually, any of us might see ourselves in the place of the shepherds, if we've ever felt excluded, or experienced being an "outsider" of some kind. We might fit in the place of the shepherds if we've never gotten too excited about God. The place of the shepherds is the place of seekers, looking to see if God might be real, even in the ordinary routines of life. Their place is that of guests invited FIRST to the party, no longer outside. Their place is that of those being CHANGED- people willing to be open to God's message, and willing to go and tell others about their experience.

Who else do we picture at the stable? The wise men from the East are often depicted there. They were likely of a high class in their society, learned, educated, respected. They believed in their abilities to interpret observed phenomena, to make sense of God in the world. Storyteller Garrison Keilor imagined the shepherds as parking lot attendants—and then characterized the wise men as professors doing research at a prestigious eastern ivy-league university. One of them was even the CHAIR of the WISDOM DEPARTMENT, in Keilor's version of Christmas.

Who would we see in the Wise Men's place visiting the newborn Christ? --College graduates- Scientific researchers—ministers—the ambitious and upwardly mobile? The Christmas story suggests that when such people seek an encounter with the living God, they may be astounded by God's reality. The first wise seekers were. They were awestruck, fell on the ground, and worshipped the divine child. Adoration welled up in their hearts; it spilled over spontaneously, even though, in Garrison Keilor's vision of the wise men as professors, "adoration and worship" were not the purpose of the grant for their studies. Our place in the stable, if we come as the wise seekers, deploying all our resources to discover the holy and sacred, will lead us to grateful, generous, amazed awe.

Who else was in the stable? Joseph. We picture Joseph as a "Father Knows Best" kind of guy- the Great American Dad- type: cool, in control, sane, rational, on top of the situation, responsible. Who might take the place of Joseph in the stable of Christmas 2006? Any of us who grew up as "the good son" or "the good daughter" in our families might find ourselves in that place. We are the ones who got good grades, who were responsible with our chores, who prepared to get a good job and gained a reputation of being a dedicated worker, who care for yards, homes, cars, and children reliably and capably.

What place is ours, when we step into Joseph's sandals? We gaze at the Christ child in some bewilderment, but in joy. We are willing to take the risk of believing God is behind this wild scheme. We decide to trust in the reality of dreams that come from God. We dare to believe that Mary's pregnancy is a gift of divine grace, even in the face of the world's disapproval. In Joseph's place, we learn trust with a capital "T"; trust in the midst of fracturing, disruptive, embarrassing events. In Joseph's place, we stand by and support others as God's hand works in human lives.

And there, in the stable, is also Mary. What is Mary's place in that barn of noisy animals and earthy smells? Mary was a simple, homespun teenager. There is nothing to tell us she was a great beauty, though most artists depict her as one. Who might be in Mary's place in the stable tonight??? –Simple, down-to-earth people, following along life's way, with nothing exceptional about them?? Inside, they may have secret dreams and longings, but the harsh glare of reality seems to promise only a life of hard work to provide life's necessities.

When we take Mary's place in the stable, we, like Joseph, must embrace trust with a capital "T". We must trust God enough to make our whole selves available to God's Holy Spirit, that God might bring something new to birth through us. In Mary's place we must engage in the hard work of labor, to bring forth God's creation. In Mary's place we open our personal lives to others. We welcome those who want to share in what God is doing. We invite others to enter the miracle. In Mary's place we say, "Yes" to God, pondering the meaning of that deep in our hearts. We say "Yes" even though the meaning is still unsure, the pieces of the puzzle are still scattered on the floor, mixed with the dust and straw.

Tonight we remember the Christmas story. We remember its glory and beauty, made known in common sights, sounds and smells. We see the stable, whose feedbox cradles a tiny child. Friends, WE are part of this story. We are invited into that stable. Like the shepherds, the wise men, Joseph and Mary, God invites us to draw near. On this holy night of joy, may we each ponder this question deep in our hearts, "Where is MY place in the stable?" Christ is born. He awaits your visit. Will you find and take your place at his side?