

CHRISTMAS EVE
December 24, 2018

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Theme: An Empty Manger

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ who was in the beginning with God and then became flesh to live among us. Amen

She was seven years old at the time. On Christmas Eve her parents drove Mary to their church so she could be Mary (the mother of our Lord) at the annual Christmas pageant. When they arrived the church was ablaze with lights and already filled with people. The din was palpable. Adults were shouting their greetings to one another while the children ran around dressed up like angels and shepherds and barnyard animals. But Mary was in a mood and instead of joining the other children she marched straight to the dressing room to prepare for her important role.

It was time. The lights in the sanctuary dimmed and the pageant started. Mary came onto the stage with tightened lips. She spoke her lines so softly that few could hear the words – *My soul, my soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.* She spoke without an ounce of joy in her heart. Ignoring the somber Mary the angels entered the scene and giggled and sang and then the decree went out and Mary came back carrying a floppy doll. Joseph dutifully accompanied her to the manger.

For the longest time Mary said nothing and only stared at the manger that now held the baby doll. And then while the shepherds watched over their flocks by night Mary decided to slip her hand into the manger and yanked the doll out by its toes. She stormed into the darkened sacristy and in what felt like an eternity Mary reemerged but she was empty-handed. As if a weight had been lifted from her small shoulders she danced her way to the manger and knelt down next to it just like we imagine the first Mary did so many centuries ago. Her face was radiant and full of adoration. She remained on her knees while the multitude of the heavenly host praised God. She smiled and happy tears ran down her cheeks as the pageant drew to a close.

Oh, Mary, where did you put Jesus?

We all have traditions around this time of year and some concern the setup and placement of the crèche. In Pittsburgh I used to set up the stable in the entry of the synod office and then I placed all of the main characters a safe distance away. Jesus remained hidden. Every day when I came into the office I would move Mary and Joseph closer and closer to the manger. It was not until we held our special worship service for all of our staff members that we would ceremoniously put the baby Jesus in his crib. And then during the twelve days of Christmas I would slowly bring in the three wise men so they could arrive safely on January 6, the day we celebrate Epiphany.

We come this most holy night to see the Christ child in human form, all cute and cuddly with his mother and earthly father beaming from ear to ear. We can picture Mary, the mother of our Lord, slipping her hand into the manger and carefully holding her new son. And in the background we can hear the animals making their funny little noises. We come because a child has been born and not just any child. He is the Son of God. He is the long-expected Messiah. He is our Savior.

But our seven-year-old Mary has certainly given us several things to contemplate on this very holy night. She beamed from ear to ear once she removed the doll from the manger and left it empty. We are not sure where she put the doll but it should make us think about where we put Jesus once Christmas is over. In all of our crèches we place that little baby in the manger at some point and then when the holidays are over we put all our decorations away ... including Jesus. We put him in a box and tape it shut until the same time next year.

On this night we know where Jesus is because that is the reason we came here. We came to worship him and to sing our favorite hymns that praise his holy name. But even as early as tomorrow where will we put him? Will we have the determination of our seven-year-old Mary to slip our hand into the manger and pick him up? Will we be more gentle with him and take him with us into tomorrow and the next day and the day after that?

As the story goes we are not sure what Mary did with the doll that night but by the lightness of her steps and the reverent way that she knelt at the empty manger she understood (at least in part) the wonder of the night. It is the power of God's love that came to this seven-year-old Mary.

Oh, Mary, where did you put Jesus and why did you want the manger to be empty?

Our seven-year-old Mary is teaching us this night to adore the God we cannot see. She is teaching us to trust the promises of old. It is for this that God through Christ broke into our world. God said to Abraham that all the nations of the world will be blessed. God said to the prophets that all people will be blessed. And on this night God blesses us.

On the way home from the Christmas pageant Mary told her Dad that the doll was not Jesus so it did not belong in the manger. Then she asked her father if Jesus had to be placed in the manger on Christmas Eve. After all he came from heaven and then he was born and once he died he went back to heaven again. He comes and goes all the time and he should not be boxed into one place on one given night.

You see, it was that very same day that Mary sat in that very same church (next to her parents) for the funeral of an elderly woman who meant the world to all of them. And on that night it seemed to be important to Mary for that manger to be as empty as the tomb of Christ.

It would be a lot for a child to grasp but I am sure the *Service of Resurrection* held that very afternoon still danced in her head as she knelt before the manger. It would explain her mood and her actions. Could she truly understand that the Christmas story is intimately linked to the entire story of Jesus? For without the rest it is just the birth of another baby. Christmas takes on meaning through the life, ministry, death, resurrection, ascension and promised return of Jesus Christ. It is a story that calls us to humility because it is a story that takes us all the way from this manger to the cross and empty tomb. For it is at the end of his life that we meet Christ again in such a profound way.

Oh, people of God, where will we put Jesus when we put our manger scenes away?

I pray that we will all keep him as near to us tomorrow as he is near to us this night. Amen