

Christmas Sermon, Year A, 2019, Jane A. Beebe

“And [Mary] 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.” (Luke 2:7)

The Incarnation is a great and holy mystery. In the Nicene Creed we recite that Jesus is: “...*eternally begotten* of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, *begotten not made*.” Eternally begotten: so Christ has been here with us from the beginning. That is the meaning of Emmanuel: God with us. Jesus is begotten not made; he is born to us a human being. God chooses to send God’s self to live among us, as one of us. He is born of a human mother; he is laid in a manger, wrapped in swaddling bands. There was no room for this Holy Family in the inn. No matter. To the coming of this Child, Mary has said, “Yes.” Joseph has said, “Yes.” In their own way, with hooting, lowing, neighing, and soft breathing, the animals in the shed have said, “Yes.”

What I find so moving is that Jesus enters—chooses to enter—into small spaces: cattle sheds, mangers, even and especially our hearts. After bringing the whole universe into being, and calling it good, God does one more thing: he comes down from heaven. As in Christina Rossetti’s lovely poem that we will sing at Communion:

“Love came down at Christmas,
Love all lovely, Love Divine,
Love was born at Christmas,

Star and Angels gave the sign.”

Even more wonderfully, St. John Chrysostom tells us in his Christmas homily, “Yet He has not forsaken His angels, nor left them deprived of His care, nor because of His Incarnation has he departed from the Godhead.”

I imagine Jesus talking to his parents as a child. “Tell me one more time,” he may have said, “about the day I was born.” And he hears again the story about being wrapped in bands of cloth, his manger bed, all the strange and wonderful persons who came to visit: shepherds, wise people, angels. Is it any wonder Jesus loved what was lowly? He could see the potential in what others may have dismissed as too small, too unruly, too unworthy: mustard seeds, sheep, the lost. Having entered into a space where there was no space, he is uniquely equipped to seek us out, to be our Savior. He restores the abandoned parts of ourselves, wrapping us in bands of love.

The English medieval mystic Julian of Norwich wrote about series of revelations or “showings,” as she calls them, that were given to her after a severe illness. Her first such vision seems to evoke Jesus’ manger babyhood in astonishing detail. She says, “During this first showing, our Protector showed me a spiritual view of the Divine One’s intimate love for us. I saw that the Divine Spirit is everything that is good, everything that comforts us and give us pleasure. This

Spirit is our clothing. In love, the Divine One wraps us up, holds us tight, and encloses us with tenderness. The Spirit lives in everything good that we encounter, the entire universe, and we shall never be abandoned.”

My mother loved small things. She delighted in eating her ice cream with tiny ice cream spoons. My father would have none of it. What was the point of eating a dessert with a small spoon? One of her prized possessions was a set of demitasse coffee cups and saucers from Belgium. She favored small patterns for Christmas wrap—especially if they had baby animals frolicking in the snow. When writing letters to me at school, she would sometimes enclose them in cards that showed animal mothers holding their babies. I still have a miniature creche set she bought long ago. Baby Jesus is barely two centimeters long.

What was it about little things that so attracted my mother? There is something exquisite about a tiny thing beautifully made: hummingbirds or snowdrops. Small things may appear fragile, vulnerable. They invite our care, our love. I think of Psalm 139 where the Psalmist praises God for his being “...fearfully and wonderfully made.” (Psalm 139:14) Yet in contemplating what appears insignificant, what is otherwise overlooked, we may behold the whole of God’s glory.

Julian of Norwich also famously describes in her *Showings* this very phenomenon. “And in this he showed me a little thing, the quantity of a hazel nut,

lying in the palm of my hand, as it seemed. And it was as round as any ball. I looked upon it with the eye of my understanding, and thought, ‘What may this be?’ And it was answered generally thus, ‘It is all that is made.’ I marveled how it might last, for I thought it might suddenly have fallen to nothing for littleness. And I was answered in my understanding: It lasts and ever shall, for God loves it. And so have all things their beginning by the love of God.”

Jesus not only enters into small spaces; he comes to us as a small being himself. He knows what it is to be a child. He has the directness and honesty of a child—however disconcerting it may be to us! Is it any wonder that Jesus invites us to see the world as a child sees it? We have that lovely story in Matthew 18:2-4. ‘[Jesus] called a child, whom he put among [the disciples], and said, “Truly I tell you, unless you change and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever becomes humble like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.”’

It is just a bit later in Luke (and it appears only in Luke) that we hear the story of Jesus, a self-possessed 12-year-old, staying behind in the Temple after Passover, clearly worrying his parents no end. They search for him frantically for three days. In the words of 12-year-olds everywhere, Jesus’ only response is, “‘Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?’” (Luke 2:49) Children and young people have their own stories of God’s

Kingdom to tell. What may we see and hear if we allow our gaze to become like a child's? I wonder if Jesus and John the Baptist, who are described as cousins, became best friends. What adventures they must have had that enabled them to be comfortable in the wilderness. First-century scouts?

In today's story of Jesus' birth in the Gospel of Luke we hear that it is shepherds who first come to adore Jesus after their extraordinary encounter with angels. They become apostles, sharing what they have seen. Jesus never stops inviting us to behold Him, whether we are children ourselves, or simply children at heart. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of heaven belongs." (Matthew 19:14)

"Wexford Carol"-trad.

"Good people all, this Christmas time,
Consider well and bear in mind
What our good God for us has done
In sending his beloved son
With Mary holy we should pray,
To God with love this Christmas Day
In Bethlehem upon that morn,
There was a blessed Messiah born

The night before that happy tide
The noble Virgin and her guide
Were long time seeking up and down
To find a lodging in the town
But mark right well what came to pass
From every door repelled, alas
As was foretold, their refuge all
Was but a humble ox's stall

Near Bethlehem did shepherds keep
Their flocks of lambs and feeding sheep
To whom God's angel did appear
Which put the shepherds in great fear
Arise and go, the angels said
To Bethlehem, be not afraid
For there you'll find, this happy morn
A princely babe, sweet Jesus, born”