

Sermon on Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1-20
Custer Lutheran Fellowship, 12-24-2006 by Pastor David Van Kley

A CHRISTMAS COLLAGE

By now, you've received a lot of Christmas mail. If you're like me, you've barely had time to skim those cards and letters. Still, I bet you've studied the **pictures** included in each mailing. Is that really a streak of gray in Tom's hair? Are your old friends standing in front of the Eiffel Tower? Does your niece's baby look like her?

Here are three Christmas pictures, each distinct and yet, they belong together.

The first is of a village on the plains of western Nicaragua, a few kilometers from the country town of Somotillo, near the mountains that bisect that country and run on up into Honduras. The village is called LaFragua. To get to it, you ford a large streambed, nearly dry this time of year, but a raging torrent in the rainy season. Crossing the river, you observe families kneeling beside rivulets of water, washing dishes, bathing children.

LaFragua is up the hill on the other side. A collection of wooden lean-tos, maybe 20 in all, hidden among trees and shrubs. An open well, surrounded by barbed wire. Chickens running everywhere. Pigs. A few cattle, mostly in pens. You see a few men in the distance, seated on horseback, watching. But it is the women and children who greet you. The children sing in Spanish: songs of welcome, songs of faith. As afternoon fades to starry, starry night, you hear stories of the place, spoken through an interpreter. How many people died and how many homes were destroyed by Hurricane Mitch. The lack of medical care. Malnutrition. You hear also about their pastor, a lay woman from the country's largest city, who fords the stream on a swimming horse during the rainy season to share Word and Sacrament. Stories of poverty and love.

All that night, in the inky dark of a house with no running water or electricity, you think about these things. You think about them as you try to sleep on the couple's hard wicker bed and wonder where **they** are sleeping. You think about them when you awake in the morning, heaving, because your body is fighting bacteria left on dishes washed in a river. You think about them when you hand out medicines at the clinic and throw a Frisbee to kids in the clearing. It's a miracle that people from such different worlds can be brought together! Surely **God** is in that miracle!

The second picture is more familiar—and yet, whenever we read Luke 2, we see something new. For me, tonight, it is the word **registration**. Mary and Joseph went to be **registered**. That sounds so innocent! Like going to the polls or filling out a raffle ticket. But there was nothing innocent about **this** registration. The Roman government counted people in occupied countries in order to demand tribute. With the military police watching, people were forced to travel eighty or a hundred miles on foot, to pay exorbitant sums to a foreign power they resented. Poor people like Joseph. Pregnant people like Mary. Picture that!

They “went to be registered—taxed—in the city of David called Bethlehem.” **City** of David? As if! Bethlehem was a scruffy little **village**, like Pringle or Oelrichs or LaFragua, whose only claim to fame was that King David ran sheep there as a boy! So picture a Pringle sized town in the arid hills of Judea.

“There was no place for them in the inn”—not the string of **Comfort and Holiday Inns** that fill up during the Rally! The Greek word translated here as “inn” is the word used later for **the upper room** in which Jesus and the disciples share the last supper. Joseph’s relatives didn’t even have a guest room to offer them. Maybe that was because Joseph had a lot of relatives in need of sleeping quarters. Or because Mary was shamefully, prematurely pregnant. At least someone let them sleep in the chicken coop at the edge of their house. Picture that.

Angels descended on the hillside outside Bethlehem and proclaimed good news to startled shepherds, using **grand** language: “unto you is born this day in the city of David, a **Savior**, the **Lord!**” These were the very titles Emperor Augustus claimed for himself. **He** was the world’s Savior; **he** was Lord of the empire! “Not so!” say the angels. The **real** Lord and Savior is a baby wrapped up in diapers, lying in a cattle trough. The **real** peace is not the Pax Romana; it comes through God’s Messiah. The emperor thought he was in charge, but he was actually doing God’s will. He thought he making the world pay; actually, through him, God was giving the world a gift!

Two different worlds were brought together that starry night. Rome and Bethlehem. The human and the divine. And surely, God was in the miracle, all wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.

The third picture on this windy night is of a crowded church. Do you see yourself in the picture, sandwiched between Mom and Dad and some people you’ve never met? There are (200, 300, 400) of us, each with her or his own story. Maybe it’s pure joy to be together with your extended family. Maybe you’ve opened presents already or are looking forward to it tonight. Maybe you’re excited about the festive meal you will share. Or you’ve already had a drink or two to soften the edges of the night.

Then, again, maybe being with others in the family is a little weird, because well, families **are!** Maybe you’re dealing with tension because at 9 o’clock you have to run the kids to your ex. If that’s the worst of it, give thanks: on this night, my son’s wife’s family is dealing with the tragedy of a step-son shooting his step-father.

Everyone has a story. Maybe you’re celebrating a birth in the family this Christmas! Or grieving the death of a beloved husband or wife.

Perhaps you’re dealing with cancer or someone you love has been diagnosed bipolar. Maybe, like the couple that sat in my office earlier this week, you’ve been threatened with eviction by your landlord. Or you’re a college student breathing a sigh of

relief because the semester is finally over. Or you're an 8th grader worried about what your report card will say.

Everyone has a story tonight. We are happy and we are sad. We are expectant and we are on edge. We are together and we are alone. **The message of Christmas is that God is right there in the middle of it all.** Wrapped up in humanity, in bands of cloth, and lying in a manger. Immanuel, which means: "God with us"!

Because Jesus was born at Bethlehem, God comes to **us** this windy night and God comes to LaFragua, Nicaragua, where it is also windy and dry tonight, but sixty degrees warmer. Everywhere, God brings together people of different worlds, which is a miracle, and God brings together the human and the divine, which is—I suppose—the greater miracle. Whatever your story tonight, God loves you more than you can imagine. God has come to redeem you! Which is good news and a great joy. And more than enough reason to hope that even that which is oppressive and sinful among us may yet be overcome by grace.

You know the goofy series of picture books called **Where's Waldo?** You open the book and see a mass of human beings pictured at a zoo. There are faces everywhere and behind every face there is a story. But you can be sure that Waldo will be there, hard to find, but in the middle of it all, sandwiched between a young mother holding her baby and a large parakeet in a cage.

I hope it's not too irreverent to suggest that it's the same with the Son of God! Amen.