

Christmas Eve 2017, Dungeness Valley Lutheran Church, Sequim WA. Isaiah 9:2-7, Luke 2:1-20.

It's a joy to welcome you to worship this Christmas Eve. The songs, the candles, the holy words all seek to honor the Christ child, grown to be our Lord. We gather as community in a time that can be hectic, happy, or holy; busy and beautiful; sacred, sad or all of the above.

Many of us have nativity scenes in our homes: little barns with Mary, Joseph and the baby, perhaps some angels and shepherds, maybe a cow, a donkey. Some of these are valuable, made of china or crystal or hand-carved or hand-painted: beautiful works of art we pass from generation to generation. They remind us of the first Christmas and they remind us of parents and grandparents who have gone before us in the faith, people we sat next to in church as children on Christmas Eve.

Most of the people who gave us their vintage manger scenes did not know how to order gifts and toys on the internet. Some drove horses, many had no indoor plumbing. Some came from other countries, used oil lamps for evening light. Theirs may have been harsher lives than ours, but perhaps also less cluttered with the distractions of today.

Looking at those old manger scenes might remind us of the triumph of the basics of human existence: patience, obedience, gratitude, faith and kindness – the ageless and durable values of life sought at Christmas time and all through the year.

This might be the message carried with the old and valuable manger sets. But there is also a great message in the inexpensive manger scenes as well. Fortunate is the child who has an unbreakable nativity set on a low table in his or her home. I'll tell you why.

One of my friends once told me about the manger scene in her home. After her grandchildren had gone home one day, my friend was surprised to find a small, green plastic dinosaur, one of the children's treasures, peering at Baby Jesus in the manger. Grandma thought it was hilarious. I thought it had sermon potential.

"It's perfect!" I said. Each of us can place our self or something that represents what we treasure deeply at the side of the manger. I frequently would place an old dime-store white horse in with my shepherds. It didn't match, but it reminded me of the hopes and dreams of my childhood.

Jesus invites us ALL to his manger – whether we match the blessed mother  
or the shabby, unwashed shepherds,  
or the wealthy kings  
or whether we feel out of place.

He invites us as we are, with our dinosaur ideas and doll-like fantasies, with our joys and sorrows, our superficial jokes or our deepest ponderings, with our health and with our illnesses, with our wealth and with our debts, and, yes, with our good deeds and our bad. “Come,” he says, “there is room for YOU.”

If a child has a manger scene to play with, the results can be both amusing and profound. Mom and Dad sometimes laugh after the children go to bed as they find Baby Jesus in a hot wheel car,

The blessed mother keeping company with the Barbies,  
And the shepherds scattered around the house, keeping watch over the flocks of legos, pokemon cards, TV remotes, and action figures.

Why is this image profound? Because Jesus WANTS to come into our everyday lives. To be there with us wherever we are, in our temptations, in our conversations, at work, at mealtime, playing with kids, cooking, cleaning, caring for people who have forgotten our names – to make these everyday times holy by his presence. To make our lives holy by exchanging his goodness for our errors and sins. That holy exchange is our greatest Christmas present – and it lasts forever.

Jesus is with us this night – in his story, in one another, in his gift of real presence in Holy Communion. “Please touch!” he says. Touch the manger scene figures, touch one another with words of peace, let me touch you as you long for the accepting faith of young mother Mary, as you long for Joseph’s willingness to work and care for the child of his young wife – the child of his heart if not of his body.

And remember the shepherds, the poor relatives who came to call. No one would have invited these people – virtual outcasts of society. But they were the first to hear the angel voices, to recognize baby Jesus as Lord of All, and to glorify God for all that they had heard and seen.

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There’s one fellow you don’t have in your manger scene. Nor I in mine. He was a no-show. He was working, stressed, maybe depressed or maybe indifferent. Maybe so overwhelmed by his job that he didn’t realize a young woman had delivered a baby in his stable. The innkeeper. Caught up like so many in the chaos

of Roman tax overhaul while the eternal drama of “God come among us” played out right under his nose.

There is an innkeeper in your life, someone who is not here tonight. Remember that person in prayer. Share some of your Christmas joy with him or with her.

Share the joy, for the God of all Creation who set this whole event in motion before the world was made – this God became the baby in the manger. This God cries out, “Touch me...I am human now...and please let me touch you with my words, with water, with bread and wine, with the peace shared by those who love me – the peace which the world cannot give.”

My prayer for you this night is that you will place your heart at Jesus’ manger – and that you will let this same Jesus go with you on the everyday path God has set before you, to comfort and encourage you tonight, tomorrow and always. Amen.