

Christmas Eve--The Extraordinarily Ordinary Birth: *Luke 2:1-20*

Norwalk Christian Church, December 24, 2014, Year B, Christmas Eve

Over the last few weeks during the Advent Season, my daughter Taylor and I read together the wonderful book, *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, by Barbara Robinson. It is the story of the Herdman children (Ralph, Imogene, Leroy, Claude, Ollie, and Gladys), the town bullies, who are, “absolutely the worst kids in the history of the world.” Yet, to everyone’s surprise, they wander into Church one Sunday--their very first time--and on the day they’re handing out the roles for the Christmas pageant!

Normally, Alice Wendleken would play Mary in the pageant. After all, she was the meekest and the mildest. But with Imogene Herdman there, Alice feared for her life if she volunteered. So, Imogene volunteered for Mary, and the rest of the Herdmans were cast in all the leading roles, intimidating the whole Sunday School into silence.

Everyone expected they’d back out, and all could go back to normal. But they didn’t. The opposite, in fact. They showed up, each practice more enamored than before with the Nativity story, a story so brand new to them, they still found it shocking.

They wanted to beat up the stingy innkeeper and plotted to kill the tyrant King Herod. When she heard that Mary laid her baby in a manger, Imogene protested, “You mean they tie him up and put him in a feedbag? Where was the Child Welfare?”

The teacher said Mary was “great with child”, but Ralph Herdman corrected her, “Pregnant!” “I don’t think it’s very nice to say Mary was pregnant,” said Alice Wendleken. Pregnant is so ordinary. “Great with child,” now that’s a term fit for Mary.

On the night of the pageant, everyone expected one of the Herdmans to set something on fire or curse in the middle of the angelic chorus. But they didn’t. They were in awe. When Gertie Herdman, playing the part of the angel, stepped onto the stage, she yelled, “Hey! Unto you a Savior is born!” And she then pointed, throughout the congregation, Oprah-style, “Unto you...and you...and you...and you...AND YOU!!”

And Imogene Herdman, the roughest, toughest Mother Mary you’ve ever seen: *"In the candlelight her face was all shiny with tears and she didn't even bother to wipe them away. She just sat there--awful old Imogene--in her crookedy veil, crying... as if she had just caught onto the idea of God, and the wonder of Christmas."*

If was far from the perfect Christmas pageant, but it was certainly the best that church ever saw. At the end of the story, the narrator tells us, “This was the funny thing about it all. For years, I’d thought about the wonder of Christmas, and the mystery of Jesus’ birth, and never really understood it. But now, because of the Herdmans, it didn’t seem so mysterious after all.”

Perhaps it's because I read this book, or maybe because I had a front row seat this Advent to the birth of my third child, but I can't get over how ordinary this Nativity story really is.

Yes, I know, it seems so extraordinary. Here we are, with decorations and lights, candles and a ceramic Nativity scene, caroling and reading this great story again. It seems pretty extraordinary.

Yet here is a story of a young, confused, unmarried couple having a baby. How ordinary. How familiar. They've traveled far away from home to visit their ancestral home, as many of you have done tonight. The only place they can find to sleep is in an everyday barn, so that is where their baby will have to be born. No midwife, just two young kids, making it on their own.

There's hay and animal stink. Sweat and blood, and all the mess that comes with a birth. Yeah, there are angels in the sky, announcing "Good news of great joy!"... yet to whom do they appear, but to a group of ordinary, night-shift shepherds.

Somewhere along the way, we got the idea that this story wasn't good enough. So we threw in some Wise Men in fine clothes with pricey gifts. But even that wasn't enough. We need lights and trees and spectacle and awe. The more layers we've added, the further away we have to stand from the manger.

Today, you can still travel to Bethlehem in Palestine, but it looks very different. The place tradition says is the exact spot where Jesus entered this world, where Mary's water broke and Joseph cut the umbilical cord, it now covered-up by a massive cathedral: The Church of the Nativity.

If you want, you can make it a holiday destination, but no need to sleep in a stable. Steps away from the site of Mary's contractions, is the *Manger Square Hotel*, a four-star establishment, with a bar and city-view balconies, and an all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet. Just down the road stands the *Holy Family Hotel*. I'm told there's more than enough rooms in these inns.

Yet, in spite of the lodging availability, it still seems so unavailable, so out of reach. A Nativity Scene that cannot be touched. Mary, so meek and mild, we're afraid we'll spoil her if we get too close. And this baby. Who is this baby?

He's the Son of God! The King of the Universe! Prince of Peace! Mighty God!

Yet, he's a baby. Born with jagged fingernails and wrinkly skin. He nursed at Mary's breast. He burped and cried. The Son of God--wetting his pants. A baby. With parents too scared to pick him up, that they might break him, and too scared to put him down, that someone may steal him away. They cry when they look at him, not because he's the Messiah, but because he's their baby, and they like every other parent, feel so

unprepared and so incredibly blessed to be the ones who will love this child. The Holy Family--so extraordinarily ordinary.

Perhaps it was reading about the Herdmans or having a front row seat three weeks ago to the awesome ordinariness of birth, but this Christmas I don't need the ceramic Nativity, the holiness and the doctrines, and all the trappings of our faith. This Christmas, I am desperate for this simple, story of a birth. Everyone of us was born...and, according to our faith, so was God.

God, in the manger. God, covered in amniotic fluid. God, so extraordinarily ordinary. Not born in a cathedral, nor in the *Manger Square Hotel*, but in a barn. God, creator of the Universe, sure...but a baby, created from seed and egg--a baby!

This is our God. Not a scowling, old man on a throne. Not the law-giver, or the one so holy and displeased with our sinfulness that he would toss us out in an instant. Our God is this baby, the one too small to even hold up his head on his own.

Who could say that this baby would be capable of hate? Who could say that this baby could ever turn the back on one of God's children? Who could say that this baby would ever keep anyone away from this manger?

The last thing they wanted were visitors, yet who shows up, but the Herdmans, all grown up, working as rough-around-the-edges shepherds. With no family near by, the shepherds were the Holy Family's family, arriving just in time to ooo and aaaah at every baby goo goo and gaa gaa.

Perhaps we're scared of what it all means. Maybe that's why we build cathedrals to cover up mangers and keep our Nativity far out of reach behind walls of complicated belief.

For if *this* family is the Holy Family, and this little jewish baby boy is the God of the Universe...well, then, what corner of this world, what heart, what person, what love cannot be touched by the birth of this child? If this child, this burping, breathing, messy child is God...then what in this world is *not* holy?

"Hey! Unto you a Savior is born! Unto you...and you...and you...and you...AND YOU!!" And unto us all--everyone of us--right here, so close we can touch it. So accessible, we can bring in all our doubts, pain and questions. So extraordinarily *ordinary*, we can believe it.

Amen.