

12-24-19

Christmas Eve
"The Manger of Mercy"

Luke 2:1-20

Pastor Wayne Puls, Senior Pastor at Hope Lutheran Church

I know some of you have seen our Live Nativity here at Hope. It's become quite a production. We have a stable set up out back, scenery panels, lighting, music; and we act out the whole Christmas story, with Mary and Joseph, angels, wise men, shepherds, and this year a friendly alpaca.

Just before our Live Nativity weekend earlier this month, one of our directors had been planning to pick up a few bales of hay for our manger scene, but had to leave town at the last minute for a family funeral. So I ran up to Lowe's to make the purchase. I paid for the hay bales, then pulled my truck up to the trailer for loading. A sales associate tossed three bales of hay down from the pile, and then I lifted them onto my truck.

Well, it was a particularly windy day. And this hay didn't seem to be particularly high-quality hay. So by the time I loaded those bales on my truck, little bits of hay were coming loose and swirling around in the wind: sticking all over my gloves, my coat, my pants, my hair, in my mouth, and behind my sunglasses. I was a ridiculous sight, a complete mess.

I brushed myself off as best I could, drove to church, and unloaded the hay out back. The wind was still blowing. So a second time, I was covered in little bits of hay, from head to toe.

Bales of hay can be messy. Stables are messy. Mangers are messy. So why, in the Christmas story, do we read about the baby Jesus sleeping in a messy manger?

You probably know the answer. "Because there was no place for them in the inn." Why not? Why was there no room, in all of Bethlehem, for the world's Savior, for the Son of God?

Well, three reasons. First, the little town of Bethlehem was overbooked. Caesar Augustus had decreed a census count, and there were too many people, not enough beds. Second, there was maybe a lack of charity in that town. Here's a woman going through labor, giving birth, and there's no one with human sympathy offering a bed? And, third, what happened in Bethlehem that night was just one more illustration of the harsh reality that God's divine agenda and our human agendas are so often out of sync. God was doing a miracle in Bethlehem, and nobody was ready for it. So, for all these reasons, his perfect Son ended up in an untidy, unpleasant, messy manger.

And it strikes me tonight that the manger is the perfect symbol, the ideal sign, to remind us what Christmas is all about. The mess of the manger represents the whole reason Jesus came. God didn't wait for his people to get their act together before sending the Savior. God didn't hold off on showing mercy until all of his people were reverently and piously praying, "Lord, have mercy!" He just went ahead and had mercy!

Christ came to a world of sinners! Jesus was born into our untidy, unpleasant, messy humanity. Jesus came to bring God's mercy to people like us. Because our families aren't perfect. Our marriages aren't perfect. Our kids aren't angels. Our hearts aren't pure; and our words, actions, thoughts are far from perfect. We're covered from head to toe with messy imperfections.

But God showed us mercy. It's important at Christmas to see this as a personal thing. Jesus came for you and me, to address our desperate human need. Because we are who we are, Jesus came. Because deep down inside, our lives are so desperately messy, Jesus was born, bringing forgiveness and salvation. What Christmas, ultimately, is all about is the mercy of God for people like us who desperately need it.

Last week I watched the preschool Christmas program right here in the church. I've seen about a thousand of them, through my years as a pastor. But I love watching the kids, dressed up as shepherds and angels, cows and donkeys, learning and then sharing the story of Christ's birth.

I remember one preschool Christmas program some years ago. The kids sang their songs. We heard the beautiful Bible story of the first Christmas. I gave my little message. The parents all took a million pictures and videos. And then, right at the end, when the children sweetly sang "Away in a Manger," I watched from my seat as two little boys in the back row starting elbowing each other, then pushing each other, then shoving back and forth, until one of them knocked the other over, and they both started crying.

Now, full disclosure, that happened up in New York, not here in Wake Forest. But guess what? Little boys in North Carolina are imperfect, too. None of us are angels, are we? We all live imperfect, messy lives. We all need God's mercy. And what Christmas is all about, ultimately, is God's mercy for us in Christ. God's mercy for you, in Christ.

Will you look at your bulletin cover for a moment? There's the messy manger. But God's Son was born for us, so we rejoice, right? Tonight we celebrate, we sing for joy, we say (read it with me) "Rejoice!"

Now turn to page ___. We read the Christmas story, we marvel at God's plan for our salvation. We hear the song of the angels from the first Christmas, and tonight we echo their words. Read it with me: "Gloria in excelsis!" Glory to God in the highest!

But tonight we also acknowledge our human need. Tonight we recognize the real reason why Jesus came. Because we are who we are. Because our lives, deep down inside, are messy. So turn to page ___, and let's read together softly those words above the manger. Just whisper them with me, to remember the ultimate message of this holy night.

Together: "Lord, have mercy."

In the manger is God's response. In Christ Jesus, God gives his mercy to you.

Merry Christmas! Amen.