

Christmas in July
Text: Luke 2:1-20
Preacher: Vicar Stephanie Kershner

St. Peter's-Lafayette Hill, PA
July 26, 2009

“The Gift of Every Season”

I collect nativity scenes. If you've ever been down in my office, you've probably seen my most favorite out of all the scenes I have. It is a set of stacking dolls that Josh brought back from Russia last year. Each doll has a different scene from Jesus' life on it. The largest doll is the birth of Jesus and the smallest is the resurrection of Christ. Each scene is lovely: hand painted with rich, vibrant colors, stunning detail, beautiful.

Luke's account of the birth of Jesus is a lot like my stacking doll. He painted a picture with rich and colorful words, detailed words about this exciting event. Words that form a scene in our own minds about what happened the night when Jesus was born. Beautiful.

But, so many elements surrounding this story are not beautiful.

Joseph went to Bethlehem to be registered with Mary. Mary who was so very young, only about twelve or thirteen, and in her third trimester. She made the 70 mile trek with Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Even though she didn't have to! Mary was a woman. She would not have been counted in the census. In fact, it is quite unusual that Mary made this trip. Joseph could have made the trip to Bethlehem and back, registering for the census and returning in about ten days to two weeks. Bringing Mary with him on this trip would have greatly slowed Joseph down. It increased the risk of robbery. It endangered the baby in Mary's womb. But Mary went with him despite all of this. And why? Why did Mary go with Joseph? Because she was fleeing from her own people. The community she grew up in. The religious leaders of her town could have made an example out of her. They could have killed her – and the baby inside of her because she was pregnant out of wedlock. If Joseph left her there, in Nazareth, she would have had no protection against the leaders. Mary had to go with Joseph to protect her own life and the life of the child inside her.

And then, on this journey, Mary goes into labor. Far from her family and the women who would have helped her deliver. Not only that, but Mary has to deliver the child in a dark and dirty cave where livestock lived. I'm sure any of us who have ever been around any sort of farm animal can imagine the stench that probably filled the air of the shelter. Not beautiful.

The angels announce the birth of the Savior, the Messiah, the Lord to shepherds. Shepherds, who were seen as some of the lowest members of society. They were poor, dirty, and thought of as lazy and stupid even though their job required much skill and included much hard, manual labor. These shepherds were guarding the sheep that were used in Temple sacrifice. They were in charge of something incredibly important to the religious leaders. But, the religious leaders looked down on them and mocked them because the shepherds could not attend any sort of religious worship or teachings at the

Temple because of their job. Because they had to continuously guard and protect the sheep. Not beautiful.

But all of this darkness, this ugliness is interrupted. Interrupted with the bright light of heaven. God interrupts the dark sorrow and stress, the ugly reality that surrounds this scene with the gift of Jesus. The gift of Jesus for all humankind. A physical, flesh, and blood gift that shows us the pure, unconditional, unending love of God.

Later on in the gospel, Luke describes another scene. A scene that we are all familiar with. A scene that is not beautiful. The crucifixion. Luke tells of how Jesus was tortured. Of how he suffered a horrific death on the cross. It is dark. It is ugly. But through his death God identifies completely with the pain and suffering of humanity when He watched His son die on the cross. Christ's death, just like his birth, is a gift. A gift of grace. A gift of love.

There is a painting at The Metropolitan Museum of Art by Hendrick ter Brugghen called *The Crucifixion with the Virgin and Saint John*¹. It is my most favorite painting at the Met. I visit it each time I go. The painting depicts Christ on the cross with his mother, Mary under his right hand and Saint John under his left hand. Christ's body is pale, broken and bony. Bright red blood drips from his hands and his feet, it flows down his forehead from the crown of thorns and pours from the gash in his side. Mary and John stand with their heads looking up, their mouths open in terror, their cheeks are ruddy from crying. Both figures hold their hands, clenched tightly together in front of them.

When I first saw this painting I was mesmerized. I felt a heavy weight on my chest, a twisting in my stomach, and a lump in my throat as I stared at it. I could see the pain and grief in Mary's face as well as John's. But seeing the pain in Christ's face and seeing all of that blood caused an emotion in me that I can not explain. Somehow I knew that God could understand my own pain, my own suffering. I felt at peace. I felt comforted. This painting was dark, it was ugly, and yet it was so beautiful.

We are constantly surrounded by scenes of great beauty. During the summer months the grass and leaves are emerald green, the day lilies are vibrant orange, even the summer rain storms seem to make the world cleaner and brighter. In the fall we experience the glorious changing of colors from emerald green to rich browns, deep reds, and glowing yellows. In the winter we see glistening frozen streams and sparkling snowscapes. Then, when spring arrives we are surrounded by new things, flowers blooming and buds bursting.

Often even though there are scenes of beauty all around us we are consumed with the dark things in our lives, the ugly things in our lives. Maybe we are suffering from illness. Maybe we are filled with anxiety because of the economy. Maybe we are grieving because we have lost someone we loved. But it is at these times, in these scenes in our lives where God interrupts. Where God's gift of Jesus; a gift of joy, a gift of love, a gift of compassion, a gift of grace is given to each us. Amen.

¹ http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/crvg/ho_56.228.htm