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Title: Let There Be Love

Date: December 24, 2017

Preaching: Senior Associate Minister Ryan Hazen

Scripture: [1 John 4:7-16](#)

Text: [Romans 13:8-12](#)

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This morning, I thought we'd do something a little different. Some of you will return this evening for one of our eight Christmas Eve services. Thinking our morning services might be, let's just say, a little more intimate, I thought it might be a good time to share a memory of Christmas. I brought a nativity with me. This one is

special to me because I made it with my dad in his basement workshop on Sycamore Street in Ottawa, Kansas. I don't remember when but it would have been after his retirement in 1989 and before his death in 1997. I wish I could remember the exact year.

My dad earned the bronze star in World War II after a grenade blew up close enough to him to pretty much finish off his hearing in the ear that was facing in the direction of the detonation. He worked much of his career for a natural gas utility provider. But, in his retirement, his woodshop was the place where he kept active and made many very cool things including toys that are more decorations than toys. One thing he made every year before Christmas were nativity puzzles. He made them for family and friends and to sell at craft shows.

My dad was the guy who would see something interesting and would say, "I could make that" and then set out to make it. I ran across a picture the other day from 1987 that had him down on his knees out here in what is now our Great Hall. He was making these wooden parquet choir risers. They needed to be ready for opening day of the new church at 86th and Mud Creek Road and they were.

Back to the nativity - I remember two nativities in our house when I was growing up. The glass one would be carefully unpacked and set up on a high shelf as far away from me as possible. The other one was a puzzle nativity made out of these thin pieces of wood. It all went together very neatly and -

it was unbreakable! It was that puzzle nativity that my dad would later use as a pattern to make his version. He perhaps made 50 like it over the years. My original looked like this one in some ways but this one is so much better. I wish I still had the original to show you.

To fully understand my fascination with my nativity, you need to know that I was almost an only child. What I mean by that is I grew up feeling like an only child but I do have a brother who is 14 years older than me. One of my first memories of my brother was a going away party after he graduated high school and was headed to the Air Force – I was getting ready to go to kindergarten. My mother always denied that I was a mistake but I'm sure that conversation between my mom and dad when learning that she was pregnant could have been similar to the conversation between Mary and Joseph. I'm guessing the words "How can this be?" were there.

Being an almost only child, I many times needed to entertain myself and during the time leading up to Christmas – we never called it Advent in our house – I would play with the characters of the nativity puzzle. It was great fun dumping them out and imagining the stable in Bethlehem. I would set up the stable and then hide Jesus behind the stable for his appearance that would come later. Then I would take Mary and Joseph and this camel looking creature to another room to begin their journey. I knew then that they traveled because of a census. Today, I realize what a trip that was. The shorter route would have been through Samaria but because of the dislike of the Samaritans, they could have taken a longer, but safer, route.

Without getting too much into the details, it would have been about an 80 mile trip. That's four, solid eight-hour days of walking. The image of Mary riding a donkey is picturesque but, if you've ever ridden a donkey, walking is preferable. And if there were donkeys along, they likely slowed down the trip. When a donkey decides not to walk anymore, progress stops.

"All went from their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and expecting a child."
(Luke 2:4-5)

At this age, I had seen enough Christmas pageants that I would have Joseph go from place to place asking for a place to stay. I would go back and forth between friendly innkeepers and grumpy innkeepers – ones that would be helpful in finding a place to stay and ones that didn't like having their sleep disturbed.

In fact, the innkeeper is not specifically mentioned in any of the scriptural stories. It is also not clear about what kind of inn Bethlehem had. The Greek word translated "inn" is *kataluma*. That can mean "guest room," "hostel," or simply "shelter." So the inn could have been anything from a full-fledged precursor of the modern bed-and-breakfast to a lean-to on someone's property that was built to house both people and animals. Scripture gives no clue beyond the single mention of an inn. In any case, whatever hospitality Joseph and Mary sought, it was unavailable to them. They were turned away and ended up out of the elements but barely with a manger feeding trough as a bed for the newborn.

"While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:6-7)

I would carefully set up Mary and Joseph and the baby would appear from behind the stable and they would become statues while the rest of the activities played out around them. It's funny the things you remember from almost 30 years ago. I vividly remember a discussion about which side of the manger Jesus' eyes should be on. Mary and Joseph were now in place and ready to receive visitors. First, there were shepherds, or in the case of my puzzle, one shepherd but that one shepherd brought animals with him. I would find the shepherd and the animals where I put them in another part of the house – it said they were in the fields – and guide them to the stable. While these wooden figures are pretty non-descript, I thought the shepherd looked like he had a shepherd's staff in his hand.

"In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, 'Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'"

"When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, 'Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.' So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all

who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” (Luke 2:8-19)

The next line is that they returned to the fields but I never read that for that would mean breaking up the scene before everyone arrived.

That’s where Luke leaves the story before picking it up eight days later in Jerusalem for circumcision and purification. We have to leave Luke and make our way over to Matthew to complete this, and most, nativity scenes with the wise men. Matthew is the Gospel that introduces us to the wise men. They are sages coming from the East and journey to Bethlehem after stopping to ask King Herod for directions and instructions.

“On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.” (Matthew 2:11)

In my scene the wise men were the biggest human figures and they had flat heads. That’s how I kept them straight from the others. I wanted this time to be inspirational and not scholarly but just for the people looking for a nugget of academic scholarship in this trip down memory lane, I would say that we patch together a number of narratives and assumptions to come up with this picture.

It is unlikely, actually impossible to think that the baby would still have been in the stable by the time the wise men arrived. In fact, scripture says they entered the “house.” Some scholars think the trip from the East could have taken as much as two to three years. Two years and younger was the age of boys that Herod set out to eliminate so that gives us one clue. My wife makes us keep the wise men away from the nativity until January 6, which is known as Epiphany which comes at the end of the twelve days of the liturgical season of Christmas. I guess that’s better than waiting three years to have them arrive. We’re not even sure there are three of them but we’ve surmised that because they bring three gifts.

Regardless of details of how your nativity or my nativity portrays the story of the birth of Jesus, there is truth that is found in each and every depiction that I have ever seen. That truth is this. Love came down at Christmas. We find out at Christmas the depth and breadth of God’s love for us. God loved us so much that he sent his Son for us. So at Christmas, that love comes and lives among us. Paul struggled throughout his life to make those around him understand this - writing to the church in Corinth he says famously that love is even greater than faith and hope.

In Romans – that text printed for today – “O we no one anything, except to love one another for the one who loves one another has fulfilled the law.” Not Paul but in First John – “beloved let us love one another for love is of God...God’s love was revealed among us in this way; God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

Perhaps you know the story of Christina Rossetti. She was an English poet born in 1830 in London and wrote a variety of romantic, devotional and children’s poems over her lifetime. In the 1840s, her family faced severe financial difficulties due to the deterioration of her father's physical and mental health. In 1843, he was diagnosed with persistent bronchitis, possibly tuberculosis, and faced losing his sight. He gave up his teaching post at King's College and though he lived another 11 years, he suffered from depression and was never physically well again. When she was 14, Rossetti suffered a nervous breakdown and left school. Bouts of depression and related illness followed. During this period, religious devotion came to play a major role in Rossetti's life.¹

Two of her poems were set to music and became Christmas carols. One is In the Bleak Midwinter and the other, Love Came Down at Christmas. In the midst of her life struggles, Love Came Down at Christmas was written as a testimony of hope in her life – profession of faith in what God had done for her and for us.

Love came down at Christmas,
 Love all lovely, Love Divine,
 Love was born at Christmas,
 Star and Angels gave the sign.

Worship we the Godhead,
 Love Incarnate, Love Divine,
 Worship we our Jesus,
 But wherewith for sacred sign?

Love shall be our token,
 Love be yours and love be mine,
 Love to God and all men,
 Love for plea and gift and sign.

Love is indeed ours this day because love came down at Christmas.

¹ Information on Christina Rossetti gleaned from www.poetryfoundation.org