

## *God With Us*

A Meditation Preached by  
the Reverend Gale W. Robb  
December 24, 2007, 11:00 p.m.  
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church  
Bloomington, Minnesota

Luke 2:1-20

Somewhere in thirty-some years of marriage, when parents moved and older relatives passed away and houses were closed up and sold, we inherited the remnants of at least two, maybe three nativity sets – sort of the “nativity diaspora” if you will. They’re the standard 1950’s American Sunday School variety; you know, the kind where the members of the holy family all have blond hair and blue eyes. There’s nothing very unique about it, except for the number of players that make it into the stable every year, which accounts for part of its charm.

There are two Marys, two Josephs, and two babies – none of which are interchangeable, and except for the blond hair and blue eyes, you wouldn’t imagine them to be related, much less be the same family.

There are some sheep, and while they’re all clearly sheep, they are also clearly not of the same gene pool. Some are kind of tan and sadly thin, with spindly legs; others are white and fluffy like lambs on a hillside in Ireland. There is one shepherd, which doesn’t fit the story of shepherds keeping watch over their flocks by night, being stunned by the appearance of angels in the night sky, but it is probably the most theologically correct thing about this whole scene. There is, after all, one Shepherd, and we are all sheep of his flock.

There are a few cows, again not of the same breed, but including a seemingly very agile breed, because one always ends up on the roof of the stable. And there is an angel, who hangs precariously by one wing – well, actually she hangs by her elbow – on a nail at the point of the stable roof. Somewhere along the way, we lost the donkey, but we gained a black poodle, who, in our estimation, more than makes up for the loss of a donkey.

There are wise men, or kings – nine of them. And one long-suffering camel who has been patiently standing there, loaded with supplies, for nearly forty years now.

Each Christmas, all of them are gathered into the standard-issue wooden stable, the kind with the fake grass and moss on the rough boards of

the roof and the floor. The two holy families take turns being in the stable; whoever isn't there that year lives elsewhere during Christmas, on another tabletop or shelf. This year, for reasons unknown to me, they're all in the stable. And when the Christmas decorations are packed away, they all return to the same tissue paper and box until the next year.

We were never the kind of family who could wait until Christmas Eve to put the baby Jesus in the manger – not to mention the fact that waiting until Epiphany to put the kings in place would have just been impossible. We told ourselves it was because we couldn't bear to leave baby Jesus wrapped in paper in a box by himself without his mother. The deeper truth though, the one we couldn't even find words for, was that we wanted God with us. For unto us a Child is born – and his name shall be called Emmanuel, God with us.

You might ask what it is about this funny old nativity set that still brings a lump to my throat when it's unpacked every year. Make no mistake, it still makes me laugh too, but there's something to treasure and ponder in one's heart about a five-year old tromping wise men across the desert of the living room carpet, and gleefully moving cows to the roof when no one was looking; something about a two-year old clutching baby Jesus in her chubby little hand as we re-enacted the Christmas story over and over again; as we learned how it came to be that God is with us.

The simplest truth – the most amazing truth about Christmas and the one we find most difficult to believe and hold onto when it's all been packed away – is that God is still with us. That hasn't changed since that dark and holy night when angels filled the skies and shepherds fell down in fear, and wise men began to follow a star. It's still true, even though we can hear the story and say it couldn't possibly have happened that way.

It's been a bumpy road to Bethlehem this year and there are undoubtedly dark days ahead. Sometimes it's been hard to remember that God is with us, with all of us, all of God's creation. We are longing for, praying for peace on earth, yet every day more lives are lost to war and terrorism and famine and genocide. Mothers still weep for their children, and children still go to bed hungry and cold. The homeless still stand on street corners during the day, and sleep under bridges at night. There is no room at the inn. There's a certain sadness about us these days, as if we cannot fathom the hope that's born in a manger in Bethlehem. And yet, here we are one more time, listening for angels, looking to the dark skies for a star, hoping to catch a glimpse of the divine. Here we are, setting out a mismatched set of shepherds, kings, angels and a baby in a manger, telling the story again of how God came to be with us.

It is a hard-to-believe notion that God continues to seek us in our exile of sadness, fear, greed, despair and loneliness; that God chooses to be with us, in spite of who we are and what we've done. That every year, we can come back to Bethlehem and see this thing which has come to pass, this baby born in a manger, who shall be called Emmanuel – God with us.

Preacher and writer William Willimon reminds us that, “There are not many religions . . . which could tolerate this much domesticating of the divine. Most faiths are scandalized by our faith in a God who takes on our flesh and is born among us, one of us, in a manger in the family’s (guest room), as a baby, no less.” He goes on to say, “We couldn’t get to God, so God got to us, coming among us in this mundane ordinary family story we cherish as the nativity. What we call ‘incarnation’ is somebody sleeping on the foldout sofa downstairs in the playroom. That somebody is little ‘God with us.’ Our God came out of the cold to dwell among us. That’s the joy of it.” And then he asks, “Why are you here? I’ll tell you. Moving right into the middle of your family with its problems, secrets, sin, and silliness; the love, and laughter, and the little joys of your home, there comes this God. And I think that’s why you’re here and that’s why there’s joy.”<sup>1</sup> I think he’s right.

It doesn’t much matter whether we believe that it happened exactly this way. It doesn’t much matter whether we talk about God in concrete or abstract terms. It doesn’t much matter whether Jesus was “born of the virgin Mary” or not. What matters is that this baby grew to be the person in whom we most clearly see God, the person whom we choose to follow. Emmanuel – God with us.

Moments from now, we will light our candles from the Christ candle and sing the familiar response, “Silent Night.” And then we will go out again into this holy darkness, holding on to the Christmas promise that God is still with us. Merry Christmas!

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<sup>1</sup> William Willimon, “Pulpit Resource,” October, November, December 1999, p. 53.