

Christmas Day – The Rev. Jennifer B. Cleveland 12.25.23

Christmas III: Isaiah 52:7-10, Psalm 98, Hebrews 1:1-4, John 1:1-14

The Christmas story from the gospel of Luke, which we know so well, is so full of beloved characters. The shepherds and the sheep. The cow or two in the barn. The magi, with their unusual gifts, making their way to the child. (See if you can spot them.) The angels and heavenly host. Mary and Joseph and, of course, Jesus. The gospel of Luke is captured here, in our creche, or perhaps, if you have one, in your creche at home, with everyone gathered around the Holy Child.

When I was in my early 20's, I went to Costa Rica for a year of immersion into Spanish. I had never studied Spanish before. I had studied French in high school for a requisite three years, but hadn't learned much. So off I went at the end of December, just after Christmas. I went to live with a family in a neighborhood on a poorer side of San José. Most people were making ends meet, but not without some struggling. Stepping through the front door for the first time of the crooked and narrow house that would be my home for the next year, I found myself in an entryway room that was empty, except for a mirror on the wall, a table with a few combs, brushes, spritzing bottle, and scissors, and a few chairs lined up against the wall. I quickly learned that Margara—one of the adult daughters of my new family—had a thriving haircutting business. Monday through Saturday, women and children lined up to get their haircut and share news (gossip) of the neighborhood. Just beyond Margara's haircutting salon, the next room in, was the TV room. When I arrived during the Christmas season, the TV was pushed back in a corner, because a good portion of the room was taken up by what looked to be a giant plaster sculpture of mountains and hills, rivers and valleys, green grass and snow, sitting on a table.

It took me awhile to get acclimated and settled. Spanish classes started early the morning and ended late in the day. I began hanging out in Margara's salon or in the kitchen which was back in the depths of the long, narrow house, trying to meet people and figure out what they were saying, practicing my *holas* and *mucho gustos*. But one day, I sat down in one of the chairs where the "sculpture" was located. And I noticed there were lots of little figures, three of whom were clearly Mary, Joseph and the baby Jesus. It turned out that the sculpture was a creche scene, but not like one I'd ever seen before. Little plastic flowers were strewn all around the entire piece. There were quite a few plastic cows, pigs and chickens, but there were also reindeer, peeking through the little wire trees, giraffes, elephants, and unicorns. I took a closer look and began to see so much more. Plastic bunnies and birds. Bears and badgers. At least nine Santas and lots of elves. There were some Disney characters—Snow White and Cinderella, Mickey Mouse. Little crosses and statues of saints. And angels. Lots of angels. There was so much detail to this creche scene. And what intrigued me the most is how these different characters, real and imagined, were spread all over the place—tucked behind that tree, precariously propped up on that mountain, standing by the lake. They were part of the creche, but they weren't gathered around the baby Jesus at all. In that sprawling and serious, whimsical and anachronistic creche, everyone was mostly doing their own thing. At first I thought, *What an odd manger scene. No one is paying attention to the baby Jesus—the whole point of a creche.*

But the more time I spent with that giant sculpture creche display—and it was set up until sometime in February, just before Ash Wednesday—the more I realized how it captures so much about Christmas: how, for months, there's the build-up of all the different sales (Black Friday, Cyber Monday, Giving Tuesday and so on), the decorating and the wish lists, the planning and the preparations. And even if you don't really get involved with all of that, it is still in the air. There's a crescendo, a swell in expectations and excitement, that leads to Christmas Eve, where Luke's gospel focuses on the birth of Jesus, the Holy Family, and the creche scene. Where we sing song after song heralding every aspect of the story, sometimes joyously, sometimes in anguished prayer all of the suffering:

O Little Town of Bethlehem / How still we see thee lie / Above thy deep and dreamless sleep / The silent stars go by.

Yet in thy dark streets shineth / The everlasting light / The hopes and fears of all the years / Are met in thee tonight. / For Christ is born of Mary / And gathered all above / While mortals sleep, the angels keep their watch of wondering love.

All of creation sings for the Holy Child on Christmas Eve. And then, just as quickly, our attention shifts to other things. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how that creche scene, *el pesebre*, is less like the Christmas story in Luke and more like that of John, even though, in John, there's no manger scene at all. In John, the Light that enlightens all humankind, came into the world, yet the world did not see it. The Word through which the world came into being, was in the world, yet the world did not hear or receive or recognize it. A little bit like a creche scene where people are going about their business.

I love the expectant hush of Christmas Eve. But most of our lives are lived in the light of Christmas Day, when things are laid bare. It has been said, "Christmas does not ask us to pretend we are back in Bethlehem, kneeling before the crib; it asks us to recognize that the wood of the crib became the wood of the cross." (Nathan Mitchell, *Christmas Sourcebook*, p. 31) That's where John begins: with the Beginning of all we know, when the Word moved over the face of the deep and spoke *and* the Beginning of life in Christ, through suffering and the cross. There is no romanticizing of the story in the light of day.

God meets us right here, not to save us from our lives, but to meet us in our lives and be with us. To take hold of our messy hearts, help us offer those messy hearts to others, and to be with—embrace—the messiness of others and the world. You might be lighting some candles today, which shed both light and beauty this Christmas Day. Howard Thurman's poem captures the light and beauty that burns bright this day, in the light of day:

"I will light candles this Christmas.
Candles of joy, despite all the sadness.
Candles of hope where despair keeps watch.
Candles of courage where fear is ever present.
Candles of peace for tempest-tossed days.
Candles of grace to ease heavy burdens.
Candles of love to inspire all of my living.
Candles that will burn all the year long. "

