

## Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Tonight, we heard the Lukan Christmas story. Yet tonight's story was different from the typical retelling that combines Matthew and Luke into a single story. And this combination is nothing new. In fact, if you glance at the Neapolitan Creche on the bulletin cover, you'll see an 18<sup>th</sup> century baroque masterpiece, blending Lukan shepherds and Matthean magi into a bustling scene. When I first saw it, I thought it was overly gaudy, too busy, and made Jesus into a "where's waldo" puzzle. And, while it combines the two different stories into one, it still captures something vital to the Lukan story – that is the chaotic, messy reality of Christ's birth.

After all, Mary was likely a twelve-year-old pregnant girl with a bastard child, and the much older Joseph was engaged to this pregnant pre-teen. Very few seemed to care for this poor unwed couple, and certainly not the Roman empire. While the exact details of the census that brought them to Bethlehem may be debated, it was a stark reminder of Rome's disregard for the hardships it imposed. The Romans did not care how far this pregnant girl needed to travel, they didn't give a second thought to the carpenter's plan for adoption, and frankly, no one cared if this child, or the mother for that matter, lived or died. What Rome cared about was the continued control of the areas they occupied. They were known to tax the people harshly in exchange for not killing them, destroying their towns, or hauling them into exile. And, this census was just the beginning of an expanding oppression

upon the people designed to keep them in poverty. The world was a mess that first Christmas.

Which brings us to verses six and seven with 44 of the most sterile words ever used to describe childbirth. It's something that could have only been written by a man. We're simply told that Mary gives birth and puts Jesus in a manger because there was no room for them in the "inn." Now, let's build out the scene a bit more: Here, an oh so pregnant Mary made the journey to Bethlehem. As a first-time mother, I imagine the early stages of labor began on that trip when Mary's water broke, and contractions began. They finally got to Bethlehem and "oh no, there isn't a place for them." What the original Greek says is not that the motel was full, but rather, that the guest room at their relative's home was already occupied. You see, a typical home in that time would have a larger room for the family and a separate guest room. It was typical that the family might bring animals inside to protect them from theft or slaughter. So, we would expect to find a manger filled with hay for the animals inside. Mary and Joseph weren't in a barn, but rather they were in the family's quarters and since the bassinet was back in Nazareth, the soft hay functioned as an early pack-and-play. / As Mary went into active labor, she started pushing and breathing. Her cramps were paired with pain and tearing flesh. There was blood, feces, sweat, and plentiful fluids. Relatives were giving unsolicited "advice." Frustration was growing in that unfamiliar place. In short, it was a messy Christmas.

Much like the busy creche, the scene outside that home must have been alive with activity. The marketplace bustled with haggling peasants, people drinking, and women nursing their infants. Some slept while others danced;

animals roamed freely as shepherds kept watch over their flocks. This was not a silent night. Bethlehem overflowed with people because of the census, bringing with it the smells and sounds of an overcrowded town. Parents scolded restless children, and children grew weary of their parents' demands. Laughter mixed with arguments, celebration with frustration, and moments of kindness with acts of desperation. Some clung to hope, while others wrestled with despair. The world wasn't serene or idyllic—it was a time that was chaotic and broken, much like our own.

A time, like ours, when unwed, teenaged mothers faced stigma. A time, like ours, when the government was preparing for big changes. A time, like ours, when some felt uncertain and scared. A time, like ours, where some were comfortable and unphased. It was a time when the fear of the Roman military gave way to, so called, peace on earth. It was a time when people worked without living wages. A time when foreign conflicts and ecological abuses kept the markets strong and domestic life in Rome calm. It was a time, just like ours, when citizenship was more revered than one's humanity. You see, the night that Jesus was born, was at a time that isn't all that far away or long ago. Because, it was a time that was remarkably similar to tonight. It was a messy Christmas.

And, in a time that was eerily similar to tonight, is when God took on human form. In a night, like tonight, Jesus was born into an uncertain future. And, this messiah did not have the expected military parade to communicate his power; instead, he had the working poor from the fields parade in some sheep with gifts of ticks and flees, and foot-and-mouth disease. This anointed

one did not have oil poured upon him in an ancient ritual, instead blades of hay stuck to his body with all the blood, fluids, and feces from his birth.

And, with all of that going on, we heard that “Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.” For, Mary held on to the words from the shepherds that shared the good news from the angels. Mary remembered the words of angel Gabriel greeting her and telling her that Jesus will be called “Son of God” – that same political title used for the emperor. Mary recalled her visit with Elizabeth and the Magnificat she sung. She remembered the songs of her people who resisted oppression, who saw God’s presence in the unexpected, and who experienced God’s liberation from the oppression in Egypt. Mary thought about how God consistently brought down the powerful and lifted the lowly. How God has filled the hungry and sent the rich away empty. How God had made a promise to her ancestors and that on that night, Christ was born into a messed-up world. There Mary pondered, treasured, and reflected on all these things. Or, to translate it more literally from the original Greek, Mary “threw together” these things in her head. She sat there trying to figure it all out. She tried to hold it all together. For, she had been through so much and now, she forever would be known as a mother. Her identity changed. Her life had changed. The world had changed. And, it was a messy Christmas.

And that’s the thing about Christmas, the incarnation, and our God. Our God is often found among the mess. For, God knows how to work in the mess and through the mess. After all, amid the mess that first Christmas, the relatives of Joseph provided protection and hospitality. On that messy Christmas night, a miracle happened that Jesus was born alive and healthy,

and that Mary survived the labor. On that messy night, the embodiment of God, entered the world—to an ordinary family, predictably oppressed by the powerful, and yet, welcomed by everyday people doing typical jobs, like tending to sheep in the fields. You see, salvation was and is revealed in everyday acts of kindness, justice, and love. Because, the truth is, that yes, Christ was born 2,000 years ago, but so too, Christ is born among us, in us, and around us each and every day.

So, as we enter Christmastide, know that our messy lives and messed up world are places that our God knows well. For, amid the mess, the divine breaks through, reminding us that God's presence is found even in life's imperfections. So, tonight, I pray that we might notice the kindness, justice, and love as Christ is birthed among us. And may we step into the same mess as holy midwives to support and guide the birth of Christ's kindness, justice, and love in our little corner of the world. Merry Christmas, dear friends, or perhaps Messy Christmas. Thanks be to God. Amen.