

Let's play a game, shall we?

The game is called Who and What's in the Nativity Scene? It's inspired by a comic strip sent to me by a colleague with a wicked sense of humor who was looking for Christmas Eve sermon inspiration.

The first thing you notice in this nativity scene is a mom and a dad and a baby. They are in a stable. They are sweetly kneeling next to the manger. There are the usual animals there – a camel and a sheep. The sheep came along with the shepherds, who had been spurred along by an angelic message. The scene is all encompassing, there are three exquisite looking men holding expensive looking presents. Of course, the visitors from afar don't make it that night. We have to wait awhile for them. It's a twelve-day journey from Persia, after all.

Nativity scenes have given many people inspiration over the past few years.

There are varieties from different countries, with the people in the scene indigenous to the country of origin. The animals vary from country to country as well. I've been told that penguins have been discovered in some nativity scenes.

Personally, I own nativity scenes from Russia, China, Palestine, Peru, & Mexico. I have one that my mom and sister and I painted. I have ones that stand alone and some that hang on the Christmas tree. And, then there are the fanciful ones, like the nativity of rubber duckies in my office. Thank you Oriental Trading Company.

These scenes are wonderful. They remind us of a miraculous birth that turned the world upside down. What my colleague's comic strip made me realize is that there is a deeper reality to these scenes. We forget the deeper message when we are in the midst of the holiday rush.

Above the scene, the artist drew lines from each creche character. At the end of each line was a title. In this depiction, there were no names, only descriptors.

(Full disclosure – I've edited a little, mostly to take out the words I can't say from the pulpit).

Animals – pointing to the sheep and the camel.

Unwed mother – pointing to the mother.

Working poor carpenter – pointing to the man next to her.

Illegitimate child – pointing to 'you know who'

Outcasts – pointing to the shepherds.

And finally

Immigrants – pointing to the Magi.

Interesting, isn't it, that there aren't any important people there. No Caesar. No Herod. No one with diplomatic credentials.

The artist also felt the need to point out that there was an abundance of straw and poop surrounding the characters. In fact, my colleague entitled his e-mail to me: The “Stinky Stable”.

The Stinky Stable.

A stinky stable with stinky shepherds is not what's portrayed in our precious nativity sets. It's not like that in Bethlehem, either. Today, the place of Jesus' birth is beneath a church. Pilgrims walk into a dark, underground space and kneel to touch a star that marks the place where the Savior entered the world. Been there. Touched that. The place is all cleaned up now, enshrining a moment in time. There's not a hint of straw. There definitely is no poop, literally anyway.

The sterilized settings of our Christmas creches betray the real world into which Jesus came. What the comic artist did for me was break that moment in time and help me realize that the Christ comes to us now and always in the most unusual of circumstances and among the most unlikely individuals.

It reminds me that to find Jesus, I need to look beyond the shining lights, the tinsel, and the well-kept holiday homes. I need to look instead on the perimeters of society. He always comes to the outcast, the unwelcome, the places that stink of poverty and despair.

Jesus comes to the vulnerable. He is with the sick, the dying, the children, the elderly, the lonely. He is with those who are victims of bullying and threats. He is with prisoners, with the addicted, with those who are frightened, with those who have lost hope.

Jesus cannot be limited to the images of our own personal nativity scene. He comes to people of every tribe, nation, and language. He enters the world, not

triumphant, but vulnerable. God pitches God's tent and dwells among us to show us that love, not power, conquers sin and conquers death.

The message of his birth cannot be walled into the city of David. It is to be shared with the entire world: Today, into the stinky stable that is life, is born the Savior, who is Christ the Lord. Glory to God in the highest, and Peace to God's people on earth.

Come Lord Jesus and save us.

Come into our worlds filled with straw and dirt and poop and make us clean.

Come into our lives when we are broken or lonely or feel cast out and remind us we are loved.

When those illegitimate children get us down, make keen in us the awareness that you were once one of those people. Help us see you in everyone we meet.

Inspire us to uphold the dignity of every person.

Amen.