

December 24, 2010

Christmas Eve

Like so many other families, when I was growing up my family too had our own little manger scene that we set out each year as a part of our Christmas decorations. It wasn't anything fancy or expensive... in fact I think it was a little mismatched... not all the pieces were on the same size scale. Some of the figures were a bit smaller than others. I remember there was some kind of incomplete wooden structure to suggest that this was a stable... I want to say that there was a cow there and a few sheep with their attending shepherds. Seems like Mom used to place the scene on a piece of fluffy white cloth to simulate snow... although I can't be too sure about that... I could be getting it confused with other decorations. It's funny, but all week I've been trying to recall that manger scene in better detail... but I don't have the best memory when it comes to scenes from my childhood... so I know my mind is most likely creating a vision of this childhood manger scene... filling in details not necessarily from my childhood manger scene but from other manger scenes I've seen throughout my life... much like, I suppose all our imaginations do when we try to picture this Christmas story from Luke's gospel. Somehow though, the inaccuracies of the scene really don't matter, whether those inaccuracies are displayed or imagined. I mean, like so many other manger scenes, it seems like ours had wise men although now I know they're only found in Matthew's gospel and really have no connection to Luke's story at all. But they were there at the manger with the cow and the sheep and their attending shepherds. As I got a little older, but still a child, various other inaccurate characters showed up at the manger scene... like Luke Skywalker and Yoda... and a constantly changing cast of the action figures of a young boy. No matter who stood around the manger...

appropriately or inappropriately... always in the middle of the scene were the two figures of Mary and Joseph, lovingly looking down at the manger. Sometimes they would be gazing upon their newborn son. Other times not... as the baby Jesus seemed to disappear quite frequently from our manger. But he would always find his way back from wherever it was that he traveled. Who knows, I may have even had a hand in some of his journeys. I can't remember. (pause)

As a kid, I don't think I ever really understood what was happening at the manger. I knew the basic story and why they were all there at the manger and not somewhere else. But I never quite understood what this Christmas story meant... or was supposed to mean for me. Jesus was born and there was this interesting story around his birth. But so what? I had been born at two a.m. after a wildly fast car ride through the curvy roads of the North Carolina mountains with Mom telling Dad to slow down and Dad ignoring her... good thing too or else I would have been born there in the car. Another good birth story, but it didn't make me special.

Part of my problem as a younger kid was that I never understood that center of the scene with Mary and Joseph and their newborn son. There were too many other things to distract me and grab my attention... like the sheep. They were more interesting to me than Mary and Joseph... who were, after all, just parents and parents just aren't very interesting to young kids no matter how interesting those parents might be. As I got older I found other things to distract me from the center of the scene. All that inaccuracy played right into teenage and young man cynicism. There wouldn't be snow. Not a wooden stable... come on. And I've already mentioned the Wise Men. The whole scene, as I saw it during those years, had been overly sanitized and idealized. The manger scene was not only too bland for my teenage tastes but it

was not historically correct... not enough fact here for any real truth to be found... or so I thought.

But as I've gotten older... and especially after the birth of my own son... I began to get past all the inaccuracies of the manger scene... all the idealized portraits of the characters involved... and I began to feel the story that was being told. I could now empathize with Joseph. I knew what that look meant... that look of Mary's and Joseph's as they looked down upon their son. I knew that look... and wore it myself quite often as I looked down upon my own son... and later when my daughter was born that look took on yet another layer of depth. There was truth to be found here. I mean, forget for a moment who the child is in the manger... and see him only as a child... a child like any other child... and surprisingly that look doesn't mean any less than it did before when we attached the name "Jesus" to this baby. When you become a parent, you hear the call to nurture... the call to give yourself to the care and welfare of another in a way... that for me at least... wasn't experienced before. I began to understand better the preciousness of life. Nurturing is a deeper experience of love... it was the love that my child needed and it was the love that child in the manger needed. Like every other child... so much of who he is is already there within him. But that person won't be realized unless Mary and Joseph nurture him... love him... care for him and help him to grow into what he is meant to be. Sure... plastic baby Jesus went on amazing adventures all over the house... sometimes even in plastic spaceships... real baby Jesus was as helpless as every other baby... requiring the daily love and care of others... like every other baby in the world.

Now as I've gotten even older, I've moved some from my empathy with new parents Mary and Joseph and I've become more and more amazed at the helpless child at the very center

of this story. Here is Jesus... the embodiment of the love and grace of God... and he is a helpless baby. Even before the baby is born, God chooses a young, unmarried, teenage girl... a helpless girl made even more so by this socially unauthorized pregnancy. And then when it comes time for Jesus to be born... there is the census and the trip from Nazareth to Bethlehem... this uncaring swirl of world events that happens around them and continues to happen around us. There is no room at the inn. They can't catch a break... and they end up in this stable with the baby laid in a well-used food trough. This is how God's love and grace came into the world... this is how God's love and grace continues to come into the world... precious and fragile. And when I look now I see that this manger scene is absolutely perfect. The love and grace of God is a helpless child in a manger... a child who will not grow into a man without the nurture of the parents who gaze down upon him. That is what our faith is at we gather around this manger... as we receive this child that has been given to us.

You see love and grace is not something that can be imposed upon the world. It cannot be commanded into being and be made to follow. It cannot fall from on high and still the swirl of world events happening around us. Love and grace must be nurtured and grown... from a point of helplessness... from a place as tender and precious as our own hearts. Forget for a moment what Christmas has become in our culture... let all that fall away for a moment... and see that love and grace... that infant born tonight there in your heart... that child given unto you. He won't raise himself. You have to nurture him. Help him along. Teach him. Let him grow and become who he was meant to be... there inside each of you his light is trying to break through the darkness. Without nurture what will happen to that child? Well... what happens to any child when he or she isn't properly nurtured?

It's become a cliché that is said often at this time of year... why can't we carry the spirit of Christmas with us all year long? What that question is really asking is this, "Why aren't we the Christians we're supposed to be?" I know my answer to that question... you have to discover your own answer. Whether you have the faith of a child... or yours is a faith that is questioning and seeking after truth... or a faith that is discovering that you are a part of a much larger and ongoing story being told by God... perhaps all we need to let Christ's light shine a little brighter through us is a just little more Christmas nurture. Amen.