

Luke 2.1-20  
Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord  
24 December 2017  
St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Topeka, Kansas

+ Gloria in excelsis deo +

Beloved in the Lord: Grace be unto you and peace from God the Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

When we show up for some big event, we want show up clean. And stay that way. That's what all of you've done today, isn't it? With church coming up, if you showered early you did your best to stay clean; and if you had tasks today that were gonna cause you to break a sweat—maybe some of you had to split wood for the fire tomorrow morning—you waited to cleaned up until it was all done. And you want to stay that way.

But not God.

If you seek to know God apart from His dirty fingernails, you'll never know Him at all. Because God always shows up to get His fingernails dirty.

It all started in Eden. He formed the man from the dust of the earth. And breathed into His nostrils the breath of life. Dirty fingernails. He came at the most inopportune time as Adam and Eve hid themselves in their shame at their own nakedness. Dirty fingernails. He came and spoke to Cain after he had murdered his brother Abel. Dirty fingernails. And so it went on. Throughout history. All the way up until this night.

And this night is no different from any other. If our only impression of what happened in the incarnation of the Son of God is that given us in Silent Night, Holy Night, all is calm, all is bright, we miss the dirty fingernails. Worse yet, we miss God.

Because the nice and tidy creche you have at home? God wasn't born there. He was born in a barn. And the spruce smell of your Christmas tree? That's not how it smelled when the Son of God was born. The dustless, dirtless figurines of your creche? The Son of God showed up in the midst of the dirt-road-traveling, dusty-field walking working people of Judea.

\*\*\*\*\*

Oftentimes these facts get spun out as some sort of lesson for us about our own behavior. How since the Son of God was humble enough to be born in a manger, we too should be humble. Or how since He chose to be born among the impoverished of Palestine, among the marginalized, today we shouldn't turn up our noses at or about those who don't have what we do—manners, money, breeding, what have you.

But that's to miss the point entirely. Because what God does in the birth of His Son isn't supposed to teach you a lesson. It's supposed to redeem you. What God does in the birth of His Son isn't just for other people elsewhere—as if you should sort of peep in on what's happening in Bethlehem and pat God on the back for being such a magnanimous guy—it's for you. At Bethlehem God gets His fingernails dirty. And how! And He does it all for you.

\*\*\*\*\*

Now get this: God could have been born anywhere.

He could have been born in a stable, as He was. But He could also have been born in the house of a wealthy rabbi.

He could have been born in Bethlehem, as He was. But He could also have been born in Rome, the capital of the world.

He could have been born of the house and lineage of David, as He in fact was; or He could have been a descendant of Alexander the Great.

Those incidentals don't matter. Because wherever and to whomever He had had born, He would have still been born into a mess. A mess not of His own making, but a mess He came to clean up.

Your mess.

That's the point of Christmas. The Son of God has come into your world, no less than He came into the world of Mary and Joseph. In fact, I can tell you for a certainty that if you can hear my voice, He entered the world of Mary and Joseph so that He could enter yours. That's what He's doing right now through His Word.

Because face it—you know the mess that is your life. How the good that you would that you do not do, and the evil that you would not, that do you do. You're helpless. You know how your addictions and your character flaws—anger, laziness, disrespect for others—how your past sins and present sins have destroyed not only your own life, but the lives of others. How you've lived as if God didn't matter and as if you've mattered most. And you can tell that because it's your long-standing tradition to come to church once and only once a year. Tonight. And weighted down with all of that you know you cannot stand before a holy God when He returns to judge the living and the dead.

That's the mess of your life. And you're trapped.

Nor was it any different for Mary and Joseph. Or for the shepherds out watching their fields by night. They were beset by the same mess of problems. How many arguments do you think Mary and Joseph got into on the long walk to Bethlehem from Nazareth—she pregnant, he pushing to get to the next stop? Who was thinking about loving their neighbor then?

How often do you think Mary was seized by sudden doubts about her pregnancy—doubts about the veracity of God's prophecies that a virgin would conceive and bear a Son and call His name Immanuel? Would you have?

How many nights did the shepherds lie awake in the countryside fearing for their lives, as if the gracious Father in heaven would not provide their every need?

That was the mess of their lives. And they were trapped. Trapped in their self-centeredness. Trapped in their diffidence toward God and His promises. Trapped in their sin.

Sure, the barn stank. Sure, a manger's no place to lay a baby, especially the Son of God. Sure, this vestibule into His creation was no proper reception room for the Creator. It was a mess.

But that outward mess was only a picture of where the true mess is: in every heart that has ever beat its way through life in this world. In your heart. And mine.

But here's what the God with dirty finger nails does. He doesn't hold His nose and leave as soon as He can. Instead, in His incarnation He makes common cause with us. He has sunk so deeply into our flesh that He makes our mess His mess. He looks at our stinking pile of ... sin and says, "That's mine." And wraps Himself in our death-bound flesh to die the death that we for our sin deserve. He becomes *Immanu-el*. God with us. God for us. God on our side.

The miracle of Christmas isn't that God did something truly humble. It isn't that He came into the stinking mess of the stable. It's that He came into the mess of sin. And bore it. And killed it. And buried it. Forever. So that it may never again lay claim on you.

That's what the Lord Jesus did in His first Advent.

Today we live in the time of His second Advent. Of His coming in Word and Sacrament. Fellow-redeemed: this coming is no less real and with no less impact than His first.

- Once He sought out the mess of the stable in Bethlehem to make His home in. Now He seeks out the mess in your own heart to make His home in.
- Once He came to bear the sins of the world. Now He comes to your sinful heart with His holiness.
- Once He was made poor for your sake. And now He wishes to come into your impoverished heart and give you the riches of His grace and mercy.

There is no heart too guilty, no heart too riddled with sin, no mess of life too great. Why? Because this is the kind of God He is. This is the kind of grace and mercy that He has. He's not above the mess; and if this night tells you anything, it certainly tells you this: He's also not above getting His fingernails a little dirty.

And He did that for you.

*pax dei, etc.*

*sdg*  
*jsb*