

All Mixed Up Christmas Eve – Luke 2:1-20

preached by the Rector at St. Paul's, Henderson, Christmas Eve, 2015

Lord, take my eyes and see through them. Take my lips and speak through them. Take my soul and set it on fire with love for thee. Amen.

Merry Christmas! Here we are at last at our celebration of the Feast of the Nativity of Our Lord, after what has seemed like a *long* Advent season.

What with it being so warm this year, it seems to this poor observer that we really haven't seen the kind of Christmas decorating that I've seen in the last few years. And maybe that's a good thing, with the storm last evening likely doing a number on people's hard work anyway. The folks that were here for the 8:00 service on the Sunday after the Christmas Parade, or more to the point, the Sunday after the giant blow-up Santa Clause out front advertising the Riverview Breakfast with Santa, as those folks can testify, I've been pondering Christmas displays for a good while this year.

But this week, as I was thinking about it in earnest, I kept remembering one particularly extravagant exhibition from way back in our Nebraska days. I have seen some beautiful setups around here, but one from the east side of Hastings back in 2000 or so really had a little bit of everything. Actually, it had a *lot* of everything. *Actually*, I think that the fella that put it together went out and got at least one of every illuminated plastic or animated inflatable Christmas lawn ornament available from Wal-Mart, K-Mart, and the Seasonal Section down at my personal favorite – Lowe's (ugh-ugh!).

Over there on one side of his yard there was a veritable Winter Wonderland. There were several of those singing carolers, bemitted and dressed in Victorian splendor, holding their music aloft, with their mouths opened to the nice vowel shape that would make Matthew Vanover happy. There was an inflatable Santa Clause, jolly and round, driving his weighed-down sleigh with a team of reindeer led by one we know must be Rudolph because of his blinking red proboscis. There were those giant plastic candles with "Joy" and "Noel" iced down the side. There is even a small army of snow-people, the largest of whom I know to be Frosty because of his stove-pipe hat, his button nose, and his two eyes made out of coal.

On the other side of the yard there stood a full stable scene. There was baby Jesus in his manger, arms outstretched above his little plastic swaddling clothes, as Mary knelt adoringly and Joseph leaned tiredly on his staff. There were shepherds with their sheep, joining the ox and ass that aren't in Scripture, but are practically obligatory anyway. Apparently unconcerned with the tradition of waiting until Epiphany to bring them into the picture, the Three Wisemen were there as well – one standing next to a camel, holding a chest of gold, one on bended knee bearing frankincense, (sniff – Oh, yeah!) and the third standing by with the myrrh. Above it all, atop the stable roof, hovered an angelic host. Well, I think the host in this case was two angels – but it made the point.

The scene really came to life at twilight when all of it lit up, from bulbs within and flood lights without. And the whole thing was drawn into one integrated work by the words, "Merry Christmas!" spelled out in a cursive string of multi-colored chaser lights. That scene must have cost a fortune to assemble, and I'm sure that if one were to have graphed the electrical use of that household, the peak cooling season of the summer was probably matched or *exceeded* by the last few weeks of brilliant December.

The *biggest* kick I got out of it, though, was the result of a great deal of work of a *different* sort. On Christmas Eve morning, of all things, I was heading over to the Cathedral early to do some last-minute preparations and almost came to a screeching halt in the middle of the road. Someone had been busy a good portion of the night, *rearranging* the homeowner's handiwork. From their various corners of the yard, some... *elf* had gathered all the elements of the display into one riotous holiday tableau. The Three Wisemen had displaced Santa as driver of the sleigh, and Rudolph, an ass, an ox and two sheep now flew over the top of the silent night stable. Dear Joseph performed some sort of acrobatic maneuver

as he stood precariously atop the camel's hump, as two of the carolers cradled angels in their outstretched arms. Frosty and the rest of his snow-family were gathered around the Blessed Virgin, either providing some sort of moral support, or being menacing in the bazaar way that I think only a gang of snowmen can be. And in the center of all this mischievous mayhem, lay the little Lord Jesus, asleep on the hay – but now somehow modified so that rather than a steady heavenly glow, he pulsed with a stroboscopic effect – manger, swaddling clothes, halo and all.

My first reaction, I remember, had more to do with aesthetic distaste than anything else. But as I regained my senses – and control of my car – I remember becoming more than a little bit perturbed with this invasion of so sacred a scene. After all, it's a perfect illustration of what I have always griped about all through Advent. We have gotten to a point in our culture, haven't we, when the carols and the lights and the presents and the wrapping have taken on a life of their own, completely independent of the original meaning of the coming of Christ. We have gotten to the point that the only way in which Advent is a season of preparation is that it corresponds to the Christmas shopping frenzy. We have gotten to the point where people who don't have the vaguest clue who Herod was, can rattle off the names of eight tiny reindeer with no problem. We have gotten to the point where warm fuzzies and family values are seen by most as the *real* meaning of Christmas, and the Grinch is a more recognizable Christmas character than the Christ Child. And here on this guy's front lawn, in all its glitzy, gaudy, garish splendor, was a prime example of the intrusion of the secular into the sacred. I remember muttering to myself for a good five blocks, and it came near wrecking the holiday for me altogether that year.

But as I've been pondering the last few weeks, you know, since the episode of the flailing St. Nicholas, I've come to think that maybe the whole scrambled crèche thing was not so bad after all. The real problem in our society, I've come to think, is not so much that we have lost our focus, or that we've let our commercialism overtake our true core values, *or* that the secular has overwhelmed the sacred.

The problem is, I think, is that we have done just what that suburban homeowner had done with his display in the *first* place. Like him, we have marked off the various aspects of our lives, and set up each in its own distinct area. As good American individualists, we dutifully observe the Constitutional separation of Church and state, and by extension, we do our best to provide separation of Church and everything *else*. We label God as totally transcendent, and then put him on a pedestal, far above the mere banality of our day-to-day existence. We carefully, methodically, systematically carve out specific areas of our life for the sacred, fence it round, and set it aside from everything else. The rest of the time we either hold God at arm's length, or assume that God is simply not involved *at all*. What's worse, the more we let the pressures and busy-ness of our world increase, the space for the sacred in our lives shrivels and shrinks until, for many of us, it disappears all together.

As it turns out, maybe whoever reorganized those lawn ornaments a decade-and-a-half ago was right after all. Maybe what really needs to happen is for the sacred and the mundane to be heaped up and thrown all together. Maybe it is time that we realize that *that* is what Christmas is all about: God is not far off, somewhere out of reach – God has come right here, right now, into the very midst of this very ordinary world.

Maybe just this once we can recognize that it is not just the angels and the shepherds and the wisemen that owe homage to the Lord of Heaven clothed in swaddling clothes. Maybe just this one night we can find it more than appropriate that even Santa and Frosty and Rudolph should pay homage to the Babe of Bethlehem. Maybe on this one night above all others, we can tear down the walls that we have built up between our worship and our everyday self. Maybe on this one night above all others, in the person of the Child born fully man yet fully God, the Eternal Light pulses with an intensity that cannot be ignored. Maybe on this one night above all others, right here in the midst the best, and even the worst, of what we have to offer – God's Son still comes to take his place on the throne of our hearts.

Maybe on this one special night.