

## A WAY IN A MANGER

Christmas Day Year A

Is. 9:2-7; Ps. 96; Tit. 2:11-14; Lk. 2:1-20

Gladstone 25/12/2021

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Babies. We all love babies, don't we? We've had a few of them here over the last 10 years of my ministry in Gladstone—and I'm sure there will be many more to come in the next 10 years. The thing about babies is: no matter how many we see or get to hold, we never tire of them. They're all gorgeous and wonderful—little miracles of creation. Of course, I'm not talking here about the day-to-day care and nurture that they require. Sometimes, for parents that can all get a little frustrating and stressful. Been there, done that, four times—not to mention the six wonderful grandchildren Dottie and I have. At least now, we can give them back if their need becomes great or their nappies become full.

It doesn't matter what your circumstances are before the birth of a child, a baby changes everything. They are now in charge. Whether it's born into a stable home or as a feature on the reality show, "One Born Every Minute," a helpless infant reminds us what really matters. A new life forces us to rediscover how much we can care and nurture. We change the object of our focus to the needs of this small child instead of all the other aspects of our lives that demand attention. This is what life is all about, we tell ourselves. The baby is worth whatever it takes to protect him/her and provide for him/her. Our hearts are captivated by a tiny, wet, innocent baby. We shake our heads and smile, and admit that life is good when it's all about the baby.

At Christmas we celebrate Jesus who came into our world just like that. He was a vulnerable, hungry, sleepy little infant cradled in his mother's arms. The baby was Joseph's top priority, and he managed to get Mary a warm, dry place for the night, even though it was among the livestock. What a night for Mary to go into labour! What a strange way for God to appear.

One way of thinking about Jesus is that he came to set things right in the world. You would think that in order to do that, God would make an appearance in a way we could understand—as a mighty warrior king—powerful, commanding, authoritative. That's certainly how the Jewish people thought the Messiah would come. The world needed a firm hand back then. The powers that kept shifting through political schemes and military battles could have been instantly quelled by a show of God's spectacular strength. Then they would know who was in charge, once and for all.

But God wasn't going to compete for attention like that, with something even louder or more forceful than our own methods of control. Sometimes the best way to get attention is to whisper—remember the still small voice that spoke to Isaiah. And so God sent Jesus in the most unassuming, humble, quiet way that demands a different kind of attention than the noise and force of a busy, sometimes violent world. He overturns our understanding of what God should be like to show us how God truly operates—through the poor, in the quiet, almost hidden. It's as though God prefers to come in the back door instead of the front.

God's way is reflected in the song of Mary we read in Luke chapter 1 last Sunday:

*<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him  
from generation to generation.*

*<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm;  
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.*

*<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;*

*<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things,  
and sent the rich away empty.*

A baby reminds us what is important, and that's what Jesus did. Babies don't care if we are rich or poor. They don't know anything about reputations, beautiful homes or sculpted bodies. Babies ask only to be cared for and accepted as they are. They teach us to love simply by loving us without condition. If you think of it, Jesus does that too. He simply asks us to accept his love—to accept him as he is.

And of course our innocent little ones aren't always so innocent, are they? They start knocking over each other's blocks and pinching their little brothers. They get bigger and cheat on tests and wreck the car. They demand a different kind of attention. Kittens grow up to be cats, they say. Children usually grow up to be just like their parents.

Jesus grew up too, but the message we get from the manner of his birth didn't change. His birth signalled God's way, different than that of the respected religious leaders of Mary and Joseph's time. They emphasized purity and strict obedience, while Jesus grew up to focus on forgiveness and grace.

His way was different than the Roman way too, that of enforced oppression and containment of the masses. It seems that wealth and political power were coveted as much back then as they are today. Jesus insisted that the force of God's love is made perfect in weakness. He showed how God's goodness is reflected in humble personal relationships, over time. Jesus' way is never in a hurry to prove itself.

In order to show us his radically different way, the way of love and mercy. Jesus came into the most vulnerable situation—an infant in a common, working family scraping to get by, subject to the whims of the Roman powers. He asks us to meet him there, not in the temple or parliament house. He came in the same way he wants us to follow him, where it is messy and human and often inconvenient.

Maybe his way involves loving your annoying sister-in-law or being patient with the slow progress of your child. It could mean giving in on a longstanding dispute, purposely trying on powerlessness as an act of love and humility. Or standing firm for those who have no voice. In other words, making his way your way, in your own life right now.

There is one other aspect of Jesus' coming that is easy to overlook. In this season, we have come to think that generosity is God's way, and that's true. God gave us the greatest gift in Jesus. But Jesus came and also intentionally received from us—from humans—the whole time he was growing up and even sometimes in his ministry. He let his mother Mary raise him. He let his friends Martha, Mary, and Lazarus fill his need for friendship and comfort. He enjoyed the friendship of his disciples and sometimes made jokes with them.

We are invited to be givers as God's people, but giving can also be a position of power. Jesus shows us how to have less control for the sake of more love. His way sometimes means we listen to others and learn from them, even though social or educational or financial status would dictate otherwise. Jesus sees what everyone has to offer and blesses it, blesses us. And he asks us to do the same for each other.

A baby changes your focus for good, if you let the experience affect you from the inside out. It changed Mary, Joseph, Zechariah, and Elizabeth. It changed the shepherds and the Magi too.

The Christ child demands our focus. Nobody has to tell us “what Christmas is all about.” It’s all about Jesus. The trick is not to discard the infant after Christmas, as you might toss the Christmas cards into the bin or put your Christmas decorations away, but to turn your attention from the noise and demands of popular culture often enough to hear his message of love. Let your heart be moved by Jesus on *his* terms, in *his* way.

God did not come to a world that was expecting a baby. It was a messy, obstinate, power-hungry world then, and it still is today. It’s a world of chaos and disappointment, of greed and violence. We see it in shootings and political standoffs. So many in this world continue to suffer from lack of resources. We are desperate for peace, for well-being, for some idea of what life is about.

And so God calls us to come away to a cowshed, to a makeshift nursery. Our gaze is drawn there to a baby, the Son of God himself bearing God’s unmistakable message of love. Go and find the nearest baby and let Jesus teach you his way, the way of love, the way to life.

To Him be all glory, honour, majesty and power. Amen.