

Christmas Eve, 7:00 PM  
December 24, 2021  
Text: Luke 2:1-20

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The image from the Christmas story that is really sticking with me this year is of Mary swaddling her baby boy and laying him in a manger. Not a crib or bassinette, but a manger—a food trough for animals. It's a measure of the challenging circumstances into which Jesus was born—circumstances of poverty and need and powerlessness. He was born to poor parents. His homeland was occupied by a foreign military power, subject to imperial coercion and exploitation. Those challenging circumstances show us how, in the life of Jesus, God stoops so low to come to us, how God embraces the human family in all its need and pain in order to be our Savior. The manger offers a hint of God's great love and our great need.

I have no doubt about our great need. Over the past couple of weeks I've visited with a number of people who are having a hard time this season—and for so many different reasons. For one, it's a feeling of being overwhelmed and defeated by life. For another it's loneliness and mental health issues. There's one for whom financial worries are really big, and another who has health challenges, and other with family difficulties that are really complicated. There's one with addiction problems, and more than one for whom grief is a more or less constant, painful presence. The manger says that God's arms are open to all of these sorrows and burdens, and open to everyone who carries them.

I find there are so many expectations around Christmas—not only for gift giving, but also to be happy-happy. We have these cultural images of what Christmas is supposed to be like, and social media probably just makes it all so much more. I wonder how many well-polished presentations you've see of other people's lives, presentations that suggest some people are always beautiful and witty, and surrounded by friends and having the time of their life. The manger, though, invites us to be brave enough to take a more honest look at our lives—the ugly and the beautiful, the happy and the sad—and to know that God comes to us in all our struggles, never with condemnation, but with compassion, with forgiveness, and with grace and strength to start again.

Dear children of God, beloved and precious children of God, I hope that tonight, the manger can speak to you about God's closeness—not to some idealized version of yourself, but to the real you, the good and the bad, the whole complicated package. In the birth of Jesus, God comes close to us—with love and mercy, with understanding and kindness. In the manger, we see how God is completely committed to this whole sad, wounded, beloved human family. So with hearts full of gratitude and joy, we sing our thanks to God. Amen.