

“We Are All Your People”
Isaiah 64:1-9
Advent 1

Isaiah 64:1-9

¹O that you would tear open the heavens and come down, so that the mountains would quake at your presence— ²as when fire kindles brushwood and the fire causes water to boil— to make your name known to your adversaries, so that the nations might tremble at your presence!

³When you did awesome deeds that we did not expect, you came down, the mountains quaked at your presence.

⁴From ages past no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides you, who works for those who wait for him. ⁵You meet those who gladly do right, those who remember you in your ways.

But you were angry, and we sinned; because you hid yourself we transgressed.

⁶We have all become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous deeds are like a filthy cloth. We all fade like a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, take us away.

⁷There is no one who calls on your name, or attempts to take hold of you; for you have hidden your face from us, and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.

⁸Yet, O LORD, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.

⁹Do not be exceedingly angry, O LORD, and do not remember iniquity forever. Now consider, we are all your people.

The Sermon

Some of my earliest Christmastime memories are from before I was in school, on the magical day when my Mom would decorate the house for Christmas.

Almost ceremonially, the last thing to go up would be the nativity scene, or what I called the God House: a little wooden stable, into and around which would be placed the various figures associated with the scene of Jesus' birth.

From these cozy nativity scenes, or crèches, we have, over many generations, derived or reinforced images that aren't literally part of the Bible's telling, in Matthew and Luke especially, of the night of Jesus' birth in Bethlehem.

- The magi, or “wise men,” weren't there the night he was born, and for that matter it is nowhere claimed that there were specifically three, and they definitely weren't kings.
- There is no mention of an angel seen standing in the stable with the holy family.
- Nor does the Biblical text paint an image of sparkling purity and smiling serenity which is the feature of many creches.
- And, specifically *unlike* the way that I always wanted it set up at that young age, there was not a festively lit tabletop Christmas tree standing just outside the stable.

My Mom was very kind in what she would allow me to get away with.

Which is also the reason why, when all the figures had been delicately unwrapped from the cotton rolls in which they were carefully stored for

11 months out of the year, and everything else had been put in its place, Mom would allow me to place the crowning piece—the infant—in the manger in front of Mary and Joseph.

The word “manger” in my mind came to indicate a spotless, comfortable, almost glowing coziness. It’s kind of a fun and pleasant word to say: “manger.”

It didn’t occur to me until years later the close relationship of the French word from a Latin origin “manger,” to eat—because the manger is the trough from which horses and cattle would eat—with the word “mange,” which is an extremely unhygienic condition of the skin, or the coat, of an animal.

And, we are told by the reliable authorities at the Online Etymology Dictionary, the manger was for any kind of animal feed other than hay, which would be kept in a rack above the manger.ⁱ

A manger makes for a cozy scene at Christmastime, but hygienic it is not.

That is the environment, that is the world, into which God chose to respond in the affirmative to the ancient plea of the covenant people as expressed in Isaiah: “O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.”

Do you put up a nativity scene in your home at Christmastime?

Some people put one up every year; some people put up more than one. Some people put up a lot more than one. And some don’t put one up at all, which is just as fine as putting up one, or 100.

There are wonderful sets from around the world, made from any kind of material, crafted in every imaginable artistic style.

One thing that I find useful, especially when I'm arranging the scene, has little to do with Biblical authenticity, or the verifiable details of how things would be arranged if we didn't have 20 centuries' worth of Christians having invested the fundamentals of their faith into this scene.

It's to reflect on whether, and how, I feel like I can relate to each of the various figures of the nativity.

That helps me think through my own faith, and it also helps me to think, "OK, if that's how I imagine myself in a shepherd's position, or as one of the magi, then where would I be situated, and how would I be positioned in the manger scene?"

For those kinds of reflections, I can only stand outside the immediate circle. We are here in observance of the baby, and I have no authority to "man-splain" my way into the heart and mind of Mary.

MARY

I do wonder about one aspect: when the angel Gabriel first appeared to Mary to tell her what God was about to do.

One day while she was alone, the very young woman is startled by the voice and appearance of an adult male figure, who says, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

"But she was much perplexed by his words," according to Luke, "and pondered what sort of greeting this might be."

Who is this? Why has he cornered me here? Why is he invoking the name of God, as if he is claiming authority to do whatever he wants to me?

Is this a friendly greeting, an innocent greeting, a threat, a proposal, a proposition?

Only after he says “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God” does he explain that she is about to be pregnant.

That may not sound problematic to a writer identified as Luke and nearly 20 centuries of almost exclusively male clergy.

But she is the one who, at a moment of—at the very least—“perplexity,” if not abject terror, had to wonder, a hundred thoughts flashing through her mind at once, what exactly was the meaning of the words being spoken by the adult male stranger who has suddenly made his way into the place where she lived.

That moment is Mary’s initiation into the nativity story.

Never mind what Matthew recognized would be said about her. Never mind what this would do to her engagement. Never mind that the baby she would bring into the world would be born away from home in somebody’s garage, more or less, and immediately hunted by a government presided over by an unhinged paranoid with no scruples about inflicting devastating human suffering on others as long as it would keep him in power.

At the end of Gabriel’s announcement, she says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

To me, that has always sounded like a statement of the utmost dedication, but one could still wonder:

What else is she going to say, in that moment of defenselessness, powerlessness and perplexity?

I wonder what she did—I wonder what I would do—in the seconds immediately after a home invader has left as suddenly as he had appeared?

That fraught moment was the beginning of Mary's life as the mother of Christ. And now, her baby is born.

How do you position Mary in relation to the baby in the manger?

JOSEPH

The figure of Joseph is often presented with his hands folded. He's pious, in the purest and best sense. He's reliable. He's a good man—"a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace"—and he dreams vivid dreams that welcome the voice of God into his life, including his most crucial and intimate decision-making.

We won't hear much more from Joseph in the gospels.

But in the times when the Mother of God relied on him;
 in times when God had something to say to him;
 in times when the meta-narrative of God's interaction in human history depended on someone who was both realistically stable and attentive to the messages in his dreams, Joseph was there.

I get the feeling he is a much better person than I am.

Where do I stand him, in relation to Mary and the baby in the manger?

ANGEL

The Greek word for angel is *aggelos* and it literally means "messenger." Before the shepherds came to the manger scene in Bethlehem, they were out in the fields, somewhere in that region, keeping watch over their flock by night.

Suddenly a messenger from God stood before them, scaring the living daylights out of them. And the angel said:

“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.”

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host.

“Host” means army.

They had already been scared out of their wits by one angel messenger, and now, without warning, all of a sudden a whole heavenly army appears, praising God and announcing peace.

Then the army of messengers declaring peace on earth retreated back into heaven, and the shepherds went to Bethlehem.

HYMN: Angels We Have Heard on High

So much of this story is set against the backdrop of night. Darkness is the mystical setting in which people often find themselves beckoned by light that may not be as gripping or enchanting as during the day.

Historically, too, we are far removed from the silences that could settle on the fields and in the towns. The constant buzzing of leaf-blowers in the Fall wouldn't begin for a couple thousand years, but beyond that, the unrelenting hum of activity and electricity surrounds us to the point where—mercifully—we're not usually aware of it.

It was not so in the region around Bethlehem. Those people knew silence, and when it was broken, it mattered.

I find myself drawn to the images of Christmastime angels with trumpets. Of the more than 100 references to trumpets being sounded in the Bible, nearly all are either the call of battle or the herald of devastation, whether from humankind or in cosmic visions of divine transformations about to take place on the earth.

Which I suppose is not an incorrect assessment of what is being announced by the heavenly army of messengers.

Many nativity scenes include an angel. Where do you place the angel in relation to the holy family?

MAGI

Of the Magi, three are usually pictured, which is probably suggested in our minds by the three-part inventory of gifts they bring (gold, frankincense, and myrrh). Their story is immortalized with the observance of Epiphany, but I welcome them into the creche if for no other reason than it's Christmastime, and, oh, all right—why not? Everything doesn't always have to be about strictly accurate staging.

I had a beloved church member in a previous church who assailed me one December Sunday morning by saying, “Why don't you believe in the Bible?” I had recently mentioned the clarification that the magi wouldn't have been there on the night Jesus was born, and this was being, er, “gently brought to my attention.”

I believe her follow-up question was, “How come you don't believe in Christmas?”

Sometime after his presidential campaign, Mitt Romney said, “When you're explaining, you're losing”—in terms of trying to explain what you meant when you had said something. Let's just say I lost this conversation.

So, I get it. It's Christmas. Why not just go ahead and allow the magi into the stable for this one scene.

What gifts did they bring? You don't put frankincense in a stable.

And what Christmas present do you bring to Christ when he returns, a sweater? I wouldn't think there's a lot of "stuff" that he needs.

These gifts may do nothing for the holy family at the moment. Maybe they will later—certainly the gold might come in handy—or maybe there is no utilitarian purpose at all. Maybe it's not about something that they need, or that he needs.

Maybe the bringing of these gifts is as much for us as it is for him.

What do you mean to place before him, and what symbol will you offer to indicate what you mean to say?

Sometimes the look on a figure of the Magi seems to say: these gifts we bring were the most valuable things on earth—until now.

The look can say, "behold what we bring." But the same look can also say, "I behold with awe the one to whom I bring it."

What do you bring, to honor him?

Where do you place the magi in relation to the holy family and the angel?

SHEPHERD

Shepherds are often pictured with a lamb on their shoulders.

Sometimes they are closer to the stable. They may still be recovering from the terror of their encounter in the midnight fields. They may be

tired from their journey and for that matter the work shift of which they are in the middle.

The shepherd is the human being at the bottom of the totem pole, among the lowest in the pecking order, and it was to them that the army of heavenly messengers came.

They were the first to be invited into the cozy manger scene. They received the testimony and acted on it.

And before the night is over, they will go back to work—changed in some way, but with unchanging devotion.

They are the small human organisms touched directly by the cosmic voice of God. While the music of the spheres rings out throughout the universe, these guys muddy their work shoes, and tend sheep, and eat with their hands.

And at this moment, the universe is more attentive to them than to any distant sun or spinning galaxy.

Where do you place the shepherd in the nativity scene?

ANIMALS

Around all of these may be the animals: the sheep tended by the shepherds; the cattle and other residents of the stable; the camels and donkeys who provide transportation,

all, like us, made by God in beauty, and all—like us—subject to the circumstances and conditions around them.

Where do you place the animals?

“O LORD, you are our Father,” Isaiah prayed.

“We are the clay, and you are our potter.

“We are all the work of your hand.”

Amen.

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ⁱ <https://www.etymonline.com/word/manger>