

Sermon Text for December 5, 2021

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Isaiah 42:1-9, Luke 2:1-7

Jesus the baby born in a manger

I had a pretty normal week this past week. The week was filled with events that reminded me of why I feel called to do what I do and that there is no chasing after glory which is inherent in ministry. I like it that way. I spent a lot of time working through our missionary in Belarus as he deals with a tragic humanitarian crisis. You may or may not be aware of what is happening on the border between Poland and Belarus. Lukashenko the dictator in Belarus is paying for refugees from Syria and other countries to be flown into Belarus and then he busses them to the border of Poland and tells them to cross the border and that they are no longer welcome in Belarus.

Now, keep in mind, we are in December, and the temperature is basically Russian weather so we are talking below zero. It is a mess. Our missionary is going there almost every day, he has received funding from the ELCA and we have chipped in and we are looking to get assistance from the Presbyterian Disaster Assistance. We are able to help in a unique way because we set up a way for him to get funds through us. But the crisis that he is facing and the realities that he faces every day on that border is not a movie, but real life and life in which you as a congregation are involved to try to make better through the ministry of our missionary.

I met with a church member in need this week as they struggle to come out of this pandemic and as a congregation through Good Samaritan and our deacons you have been able to help in a very real and dramatic way. But the struggle continues for this person and it is not hypothetical, it is real, it is life altering. Wednesday evening we had a great Clubhouse with dozens of kids present and I have the honor of heading up the recreation part of that program. What a blast to get on the floor with the kids and strip away all of the adult problems that we face as we build towers and knock them down.

Friday I went with our social worker to Cherry Hill, NJ and visited a free medical clinic there. Amazing story, the primary doctor is originally from Nigeria, a young guy, guessing in his late 20's, and his Imam encouraged him to use the space attached to their mosque to create a clinic and to meet the needs of those in the community. He did and four years into this it is thriving and a multi million dollar enterprise reaching the community in a significant way. While we were there, it was a Friday, and we were able to see the families leave the mosque and

realizes how we are all so very similar especially when we are looking to address these very real and earthy needs that every community has.

That was a pretty normal week for me, and it also reflects why I love being a pastor. I get to do these kinds of things and they are normal for me to do them. The intersection between the normalcy of our life and God is found in the most mundane, nonglamorous realities of our life. Scripture is filled with passages that point to the presence of God in the most mundane and nonglamorous realities, even while we seek him out in miracles, angel voices, and the visit of kings, but more often than not we find him with stinky sheep and a hard cold manger.

Both of our Scriptures this morning depict our Savior Jesus as being a normal, earthy person who was not looking for glory, in fact he was born and placed to start his life in the most rugged of settings, even a manger itself. That is where we find God in our own lives, in the most mundane and earthy of settings that he chooses to inhabit. Let's read.

READ – SHOW MANGER DURING THE PRAYER

One other thing we had this week was our monthly ministerium meeting at Katies and there one of the pastors spoke about how for this season of Advent and for Christmas he is going to preach on Revelation and the Scripture that speaks about the woman who is pregnant and gives birth and has to protect and keep her child to save him from the dragon who is seeking after him. It is all very dramatic and I said I certainly was not brave enough to plunge into that Scripture so I chose the Hallmark version as opposed to the Revelation version of Christmas which was Jesus as a baby. That is where we find ourselves today, in the Hallmark version of Christmas, but if you wanted a pastor who is more brave than I am, there is one in town and this Sunday Revelation is being addressed. Nope, not me.

But when you think of a Hallmark version of Christmas, this image may not be what comes to mind. Who knows what this is? In one of our trips to Israel we were able to visit an ancient farm and there they were able to identify this which came from the period of when Jesus would have been walking the earth. This is a manger. The manger was built from stone, harsh and unrelenting, and not very comfortable I would imagine, as opposed to the soft hay filled manger built of wood that Hallmark normally depicts, or that we have in our mind from the Christmas story.

What would our history have been like if this were our symbol as Christians? What is our primary symbol as Christians, how do we identify ourselves and what symbol do we use? It has its own harshness as it was a symbol for capitol punishment back in the first century, there is nothing endearing in this symbol. We also have before us today the earthy and simple symbol of

the bread and the juice. When we see that it also evokes thoughts and feelings about our own faith and who we are and the sacrifice and love that God has for us.

For us today we are going to use the symbol of the manger because it provides us with what we are after today. Let's go to Isaiah 1:3 and we can see this symbol mentioned in this passage. Let's read it, does anyone have a Bible that uses another word for crib? The Hebrew word here literally can also mean manger as well. The image is stark and not complex at all. A very simple stone manger made in a very utilitarian way.

This Scripture in 42 speaks specifically about a person whom God has chosen to be his vehicle for his kingdom and we call this person the suffering servant. He appears about 6 different times in Isaiah, and for us as Christians we understand these Scriptures to describe who Jesus was when he walked upon this earth.

One of the primary attributes of Jesus that we read here is that he delights the soul of God and the reason why he delights God's soul, which ought to be our desire as well, is look at how he carries himself. Vs. 6b, vs.7, vs.9. Our God delights in being involved in the life of those who are in need and those who are the least of these, and those who find themselves in situations of dire humanitarian crisis and moves to help them find themselves out of it in a very mundane, earthy way. God doesn't always work miracles to provide solutions. God requires us to work in order to provide solutions. Our salvation doesn't depend on our works at all, but we ought to work as if it does.

Jesus' beginning belies a simplicity and an earthiness and ruggedness that we see in Isaiah. When we get to Luke we find a very normal account of a day in the life of a young married couple. They have to make a long 85 mile road trip to Joseph's ancestral home town. What is your ancestral home town? Where are your people from? I would have to go back to Friesland, Holland, in order to register if I lived back then. Luke gives us three verses of historic facts in order to ground what happens next in historical truth. The walk from Nazareth to Bethlehem is one depicted in Hallmark but it was closer to a Revelation narrative.

They would have gone straight through Samaria which was no fun at all and extremely dangerous. But it was done, there was nothing unusual about that. The baby was born and wrapped in swaddling cloths which was what any Palestinian mom would have done with her baby. We find a simple, normal story up to this point, until we read and he was placed in a manger. Luke has kept it simple up to this point to keep it entrenched in the lowly, the poor, and the marginal of the earth. It is tempting to run to the Gospel of Matthew and cherry pick the

kings and their visit to provide some pizzazz to the story, but with the manger, Luke doesn't allow us to do that.

We are called to be in the trenches with those who are on the margins of society and unsure of what tomorrow will bring because that is where God find himself. This symbol for us, the manger, means so much. The cross is rugged, the bread and the juice are rugged, the manger is quite a way to begin, but it points to a ministry that must being and must be continuously entrenched in the least of these. That was certainly reflected in Jesus' life, and it ought to be reflected in ours. Amen.