

“The Living House of God”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

December 20, 2020 – Fourth Sunday of Advent

2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16; Luke 1:26-38

There they were on that holy night gathered around baby Jesus in the manger: Joseph and Mary; Spiderman; the shepherds; the penguins; a big, green octopus; and, of course, the three lobsters. This uncommon nativity scene was offered to us in the form of a Christmas pageant in the 2003 film *Love Actually*. And while some of the creatures included in the tableau were probably not participants in the first Christmas, it's pretty likely that some of the other elements that we include in more “traditional” crèche scenes were also quite a bit different than what Mary and Joseph experienced so long ago, or at least as depicted in the gospels of Luke and Matthew.

I mentioned in the children's message that what we've come to understand concerning angels is quite a bit different than how they were understood in the time of Jesus, but that is the case with many of the other images we have about the birth of Jesus. Mary riding into Bethlehem on a donkey: Where did that come from? Visiting magi bringing gifts becoming three Kings named Melchior, Gaspar, and Balthazar: Where did that come from? Even the setting of the crèche scene, a stable, has been added into the gospels' story as has the idea that Joseph and a very-great-with-child Mary were sent there by some mean-spirited inn-keeper.

Let's consider the stable scene for a minute. The gospel of Luke tells us that when Jesus was born, he was placed in a manger, that is a feeding trough for animals, as there was place for them in the *kataluma*, which is the original Greek text's word that has often been translated as inn. *Kataluma* is actually a word meaning something more generic, like

accommodations or lodging place, rather than something specific like a road-side inn for weary travelers, which is an entirely different word in Greek, and one that Luke actually uses elsewhere to describe the place where the Good Samaritan took the poor traveler that had been beaten up and left half dead on the side of the road. While *kataluma* could be an inn, it could also be any lodging place *within* a house. The place where Jesus had his last meal with his disciples, often translated as an upper room, was such a *kataluma* within a house, and this is likely the case with the nativity story as well.

The homes of commoners in first century Palestine were often separated into levels, with the lowest level being a room into which the family's animals would be brought at night, and these rooms often had stone mangers in them for feeding the animals. Above this lower level would be a room named in Greek a *kataluma*, a room where people would sleep. It is very likely that Jesus was brought into the world in the lower level of such a house and placed in the family manger as there was not enough space for a delivery to take place in the family's *kataluma* or sleeping area. The house where Jesus was born was likely either Joseph's childhood home or a relative's home. In either case, it is more likely the case that Jesus was born in a house surrounded by joyously celebrating family members than it was that Joseph and Mary were all alone in someone's barn.

This understanding of the nativity was one taught by a great grammarian and scholar named Francisco Sanchez de las Brozas, called El Brocense, in Spain in the 16th century. El Brocense looked at the language of the text and the customs of ancient Palestine and came to this conclusion. Teaching this in 16th century Spain, however, was dangerous business, as he was messing with the traditional teachings of the all-powerful Church. Sure enough, he was dragged before the Inquisition for this very reason. While he was later released as his

teaching was actually sound, he was again arrested and tried two more times by the Inquisition, and died while under house arrest for his “dangerous” teachings. Messing with tradition can get you into trouble, and messing with Christmas traditions is especially risky!

I certainly hope that I do not get arrested and tried for messing with some of our Christmas traditions this morning. And I hope that for doing so, you don’t lock me out of the church, like our congregation did to one of its pastors, the Reverend John Cleaveland, Junior, back in the 1700s, who was not only locked out of the church, but according to our Ben Jacque, who tells the story in his book *If the Shoe Fits: Stories of Stoneham Then and Now*, he also had his pulpit seat tarred and his horse’s tail cut off, in part because our church members felt that his doctrine was unsound.

But I do want you to consider and re-consider your Christmas traditions this morning. I feel that I can push you to do so as the universe is already messing with your Christmas—along with everything else—in this year of pandemic disruption: There’s no pageant, no cantata, no caroling, no traveling far and wide to visit with family and friends, no office holiday parties. I’m not saying this morning that we should also throw away our nativity sets or get rid of so many of the other wonderful elements of this festive season, but with life already messing with so many of our Christmas traditions, is a good year to re-think and re-imagine our traditions.

Reconsider the story of Mary. I bring up the whole *kataluma* business to point out that what the story tells us is not that she was not an outcast, shunned by her family or some dastardly inn-keeper, but that she was a commoner and gave birth in a common home; she was just a normal person. And that is one of the story’s messages of good news for all people that we should consider this morning: God uses common

people like Mary to do uncommon things, that is, when people are as Mary was in being full of faith and faithfulness.

Yes, Mary was uncommon in being chosen to carry and give birth to our savior—she was a living house of God; but she is not alone in being chosen by God to do extraordinary things. As a Pentecost people, we breathe in God’s Spirit, and we all carry God’s living message of life and love to the world. We are a house of God, a house not made with cedar or stone, but with our very lives.

And so, this Christmas, take on the tradition of rededicating yourself to God’s service. In poet Christina Rossetti’s beautiful words:

What can I give him, poor as I am?
—If I were a Shepherd, I would bring a lamb;
If I were a Wise Man, I would do my part, —
Yet what I can I give him, —Give my heart.

This Christmas, let us give our hearts to Christ. Let us follow the ways of Mary, full of faith and faithfulness, in saying yes to God’s calling. When you receive a message from God calling you to something uncommon or even impossible, may you, like Mary, respond by saying “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Amen.