



Merry Christmas!  
Ready or not, here we are to celebrate together.

For many of us, a part of our preparation for Christmas  
is setting out one or more nativities in our homes.  
For years, I put out a ceramic nativity scene that had belonged  
to my grandmother – painted by her cousin in blue, her favorite color.  
We packed that one away when we had little boys in the house,  
in favor of a “little people” set –  
smiling plastic people in a cardboard stable  
We also put out the one in the picture there, which we got in Ukraine  
when we were there to adopt our oldest son.  
Perhaps my favorite nativity set is the Jemez Pueblo pottery one  
in my parent’s house – it is very beautiful and stays out year-round.

These nativity scenes not only remind us of the Christmas story,  
they hold holiday memories for us –  
memories of Christmases past, memories of love and celebration.  
They look neat and clean and lovely, sitting on the table or the shelf.  
There is no dirt, no straw, no smell and noise of animals.



But we know that birth is anything but neat and attractive.  
I’ve recently been re-watching the series Call the Midwife,  
the story of a group of nurse/midwives who work in London’s east end.  
In the 14 seasons of the show you see many changes  
as it moves from 1950’s to 1970’s–  
midwives come and go, and the show covers historical changes  
such as the beginning of national health service, the rise of vaccines,  
changes in fashion and social mores.  
One thing that doesn’t change is the poverty in the Poplar neighborhood  
the midwives serve.  
And over the 14 seasons, the voice of Vanessa Redgrave as the narrator draws  
out themes and lessons, tying the stories together with love and kindness.

And in every episode – every single episode over 14 years – there is a birth.  
The show is not shy about showing the real pain, mess, and thrill of birth -  
births in hospitals and in homes,  
and sometimes births in squalor and poverty and danger.



The story Luke tells about the birth of Jesus invites us to remember  
the difficult, messy details of his birth.

The story begins with Emperor Augustus calling for a registry  
of all people who live under his rule in the Roman Empire.  
Luke offers a glimpse of the difficulty of life in an occupied territory.  
as the very pregnant young Mary and her husband  
must travel to Bethlehem to register for the sake of taxes.  
Because so many people are on the road,  
they cannot find a place to stay in Bethlehem,  
so they end up in the place where animals stay.

Commentator Mitzi Minor writes,

*We can imagine how conditions were hardly safe or sanitary for birthing.  
There is no mention of a midwife, so this young couple could have  
attended to the birth by themselves. How terrifying that would have been  
in a world where mothers and babies often died in childbirth. ...When the  
birth was done , Mary rested her baby in a feeding trough for barn  
animals. She had to have been exhausted. Joseph likely was as well, for  
that matter. I hope there was water for cleaning mother and baby. I hope  
there was sufficient food. But we do not know about these things.*

This birth story is not clean, neat, or lovely.  
But then, neither is the world Jesus is born into.  
Neither are the lives of the people he comes to heal and save.

We are in the midst of a busy season –  
and perhaps some of us sit here tonight  
thinking of cooking and wrapping and decorating we still have to do.  
Perhaps we are filled with this night with grief, anxiety, or pain –  
from illness, loss, depression or addiction.  
We see injustice in the world around us,  
and know grief that so many in our world lack access to basic needs  
like food, adequate housing, and health care.

Sometimes it's hard to reconcile the reality of our lives  
with the expectations of this season –  
with Christmas carols in every public space,  
cheerful lights on neighborhood houses  
sappy movies and even commercials full of happy families  
and new love and every happy ending.  
Maybe we feel like Christmas just doesn't fit in with our real, messy lives.

But that is exactly *why* we need Christmas.  
Not the carols and the gifts and the expectation of cheer,  
but the God-with-us part of Christmas.  
God who comes into the world for *all* of us –  
for every single one of us,  
and for all the hard, scary, sad parts of each of us.



Remember the angels, who appeared to – of all people –  
shepherds in the fields?  
Uneducated, unwashed, near the bottom of the social prestige scale –  
yet doing good and necessary work.  
And to these realistic, hard-working people, whose lives are far from tidy,  
the angels proclaim, “Unto you is born today a savior, who is the Messiah.”  
The shepherds rush to see Jesus.  
We don't know just what they see in that baby lying in a cattle food trough,  
but they go away changed.  
Touched by grace, by love, by the wonder of God come near.  
They go to tell the story of a savior born among them.

And us? Are we ready to be changed by this baby born,  
this God-with-us come into our lives this night?  
This God comes right into our busy, messy lives,  
and loves us as we are.



If you worship here often, you know that one of my favorite writers is  
Duke Divinity School professor Kate Bowler.  
Kate writes about how God shows up in our real lives –  
not the tidy, ordered, happy-ending lives we wish we had,  
but the beautiful, terrible lives we actually have.

She shares this devotion:

*Christmas love is earthy and inconvenient and beautifully ordinary. It arrives on December 24, when you're sure you've failed at Christmas, and whispers, You are already ready. I come to people exactly like this. For God's love has never hovered above us like a theory. It puts on skin. It moves into our neighborhoods and our tired hearts. And it stays. It's the love that moves toward need without hesitation: the neighbor who shows up with warm bread, the shoveled walkway, the "made it home" text, the presence offered by someone who can't fix anything but wants you to feel less alone. It's the love that begins not with spectacle, but with a baby—tiny, vulnerable, unsteady—a God who decides that being with us matters more than being impressive.*

So this night, this season, remember.

God doesn't wait for us to get it right,

to be neat and tidy and have our act together.

God comes now, this night and each night and day, each moment –

into the truth of our lives as they really are.

God meets us here, and invites us to be changed by love –

to become people of love.

God draws us close, then sends us out – like the shepherds –

touched by grace, overflowing with love,

to share that love in this weary, hurting world.

May the grace and love of God-with-us touch our lives this night.

Thanks be to God

Amen

