
Nativity
Sydenham-Heritage United Church
December 11, 2022
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on Matthew 11:2-11

This year, I have been inviting people to find themselves in the nativity story. There are many ways to do that, but I've been encouraging people to simply select one of the characters in the story and to imagine what that character felt, and thought, and did. The biblical nativity stories - that is, the Bible stories about the birth of Jesus - are very helpful here. Because the stories themselves are very "thin". They contain very little detail. And that is a good thing. Because those stories leave us lots of space to let our imaginations connect with the characters in our own way. We can even write in characters that are not named in the story, but that we assume were also present. Someone had to feed the donkey, right? Perhaps you relate to that person.

[image: bob's advent video thumbnail]

One wonderful example of this is the Advent video that Bob and I created together, that you saw a moment ago. Bob imagined what Joseph might have been feeling. And then Bob expressed those feelings in video form. And he did it "Bob style". And that's the whole point of this exercise. Because the video we just saw is about Joseph. But the video is also about Bob. That is what it means to find ourselves in the story. We breath our life into the characters. In a sense, we do not become the characters. The characters become us. That is what it means to find ourselves in the story. And I have no doubt that Bob has already revised the script in his own head - again. Because that is what Bob does. And that is wonderful!

That is the essence of the projects that our Video Production Club have been working on this year. Next week, Verna will present a video that brings a more human dimension to other characters. No spoilers from me today though.

Here is another video - not from our club - that brings some perspective to Mary. The video lifts up a completely overlooked aspect of what Mary's day must have been like 2000 years ago. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-gZBcQ4oMvw>

Videos are one way to bring our imagination to the characters as a way of helping us find ourselves in the story. But there is a much older art form that has helped Christians do the same thing for centuries. The Nativity scene.

[image: nativity @ cave springs]

The earliest nativity scene was found in a catacomb in 380 AD. But they were not very popular until 1223 AD when Saint Francis of Assisi created a nativity scene. Many nativity scenes try to depict the scene from 2000 years ago, as our one here @ SHUC does. This image is from Cave Springs Camp near Beamsville where I was on an Advent clergy retreat this week.

Other people have crafted nativity scenes that intentionally try to make the scene more relatable today.

[image: Beckham nativity]

In 2004 Madame Tussaud's in London featured a nativity scene with wax models of soccer star David Beckham as Joseph, and David's wife, Victoria - a fashion designer - as Mary. And Kylie Minogue as the angel. And as always, some people found the scene interesting and relatable. And others chose to be offended.

[image: Segway nativity]

Consider this image of a "modern" nativity. It's an exercise in contrasts. The magi bring gifts that have come from Amazon. And they travel on Segways. The cow is labelled "100% organic". Mary and Joseph have take-away coffee and are taking a selfie. But on the other hand, they are still in a barn. And Jesus is still in a trough. And I hope you all noticed that the barn has solar panels. It is a real blend of the ancient and the modern.

I love nativity scenes. But particularly the ones that I get to play with. Because that is how I find myself in the story. By playing. For a minister, playing with a nativity scene is my equivalent to "playing with my train set".

So let's play with ours. Right now!

[go down to the creche]

- First of all. In snippets I invited people to bring in characters that you would like to see added to the scene. Did anyone bring any character to add?

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- I also asked people to think of what characters they relate to. Anyone want to share what character they relate to?
 - Arrange the scene relevant for 2 weeks prior to Christmas. Where do the characters go?

[image: shuc nativity]

In snippets, I offered to tell you what my favourite character from the nativity scene is. I also gave you the hint that it is not a shepherd. Any guesses? Who do you think my favourite character is?

Well, I'm not sure that I have a favourite character actually. But this year - 2022 - there is one character in the nativity scene that I've been thinking about more than usual. And it's an interesting character. Because the character is included in our nativity scene. And yet, we basically gloss over this character every year. We treat them like part of the furniture.

Let me introduce my character this way. In the New Testament, Jesus has a brother, James. And we are led to imagine that Mary and Joseph had other children too. So Jesus had siblings. But Jesus was the first one to be born.

So let us imagine the birth of Mary's second child. For the sake of argument we can imagine that it was James if you like. We do not know. But certainly, Mary had a second child. Mary gave birth a second time. I invite us all to imagine in our minds that second birth. What does it look like? Were there angels? Were there shepherds? Were they in a barn? My answer to those questions is "no". I imagine that the birth of Mary's first baby looked something like a nativity scene. But I imagine that the birth of Mary's second baby was completely ordinary. That the birth happened at home. No farm animals required!!

Now I want you to imagine Mary right before the birth of her second child. And I want you to imagine Mary saying something like this to Joseph:

"Joseph, it is almost time for me to give birth to our second child. Last time I gave birth we were in a barn. I only know how to give birth in a barn. Joseph, we have always given birth in a barn. We need to get to a barn immediately." And perhaps 5 minutes later, Mary said, "Actually, any old barn will not do. I can only give birth in one specific barn

in Bethlehem. Call an Uber right now!”

[image: barn]

So yes - the character I’ve been thinking about this year is the barn.

I always thought that the barn in the nativity story was like the last resort. All the hotels were full so Mary was forced to give birth in a barn. It was not intended. It was not perfect. It was not desired. But it happened. The important thing is that Jesus arrived. Where - exactly - Jesus was born is not the point. But my imaginary Mary is fixated on wanting her second child to be born in a barn too. Because of tradition. Because she’d always done it that way. Because that is what she did last time.

And many churches seem fixated in the same way. In every church I’ve ever been in - including this one - members have told me about things that used to happen in their church in the past around Christmas and then look at me hoping that I can revive those old traditions.

I get it. It is very natural to be drawn back to “the good old days”. It is wonderful that most of us carry with us happy memories of Christmas traditions. Don’t worry. Those memories will always be yours. They can never be taken away.

But the barn reminds us that the important thing is the birth of Jesus. Other things are just details. The barn is a very important character in the story for me because the barn reminds us that the barn is not important. And it is very important that we know that the barn was not important. Trust me. Mary had her second child completely surrounded by no barns.

This is reflected in our reading from Matthew this morning too. Jesus was speaking to people about John the baptist. Some people went to see John expecting to see something very specific. So Jesus asks, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces.”¹

When you look for Jesus during Advent, do you only look through the lens of your past experiences of Advent? Or to be more blunt, do you only look for what you expect to find? If you only look for what you used to see in the past, you might miss the

¹ Matthew 11:7b-8.

divine that is right in your face. Perhaps we need to open our eyes wide enough to look beyond our past to find the divine. Here. Now. Today.

[image: awaiting the already]

This year I am participating in the Advent Book Group put on at Harmony United Church, using the book “Awaiting the Already”. This week we read the part of the book that talks about the songs in the nativity - Zachariah’s song, Mary’s song, and the song of the angels. The book also speaks about the importance of song in general. And I’m sure we can all relate to the power that music holds over us, around us, and within us. We all have our favourite songs, and genres. I have no doubt that some people here felt a connection today because of our special music. For most of us, music is a source of connection for us. At least for some type of music.

Have you ever wondered if particular genres of music work best for that? Well, science to the rescue. To quote from the book, “it turns out, music-induced chills are scientifically measurable phenomena.

[image: SPPS journal]

A recent study published in the journal *Social Psychology and Personality Science* revealed that certain songs can trigger activity in a person’s hypothalamus, the part of the brain responsible for hunger, rage, and involuntary responses like blushing and goose bumps.

But here’s the interesting part: The researchers found that the style or genre of music did not determine these responses. What is more important is what they termed a person’s ‘openness to experience’. One’s willingness to be moved by the music.”²

[image: Costco nativity]

If you are willing to let yourself be moved, there is a good chance that you will be moved this Advent. If you are not willing let yourself be moved, it is guaranteed that you will not be moved this Advent.

Advent is an invitation to be moved. To actively being “open to experience”. If you are not sure what that looks like, I invite you to join with us on Sunday December 25 @ 10:30 am @ Victoria Park, near the creche. That will be an experience. And it will also

² “Awaiting the Already”, Magrey R deVega, 2015. Page 48.

be an exercise in openness because I for one do not know what to expect. But of course I don't know what to expect. It's Advent!

We should not idolize the barn, or anything else from our past traditions. The important thing is that Jesus comes. I hope that all of us ... in spite of the hustle and bustle of the seasons ... can open ourselves widely to experience Advent in whatever form it takes for us this year.

It's Advent. Be open. Experience what you do not expect.

Amen.