

“A Story that Never Ends”

Delivered Sunday, December 25, 2011, Christmas Day

By Rev. Agnes W. Norfleet, pastor

Shandon Presbyterian Church, Columbia, SC

Matthew 2:1-11

Among our family Christmas decorations is a manger scene I bought in France during my junior year in college when I was studying abroad. The tradition in Southern France is to include the usual Christmas characters – the Holy Family, the shepherds and wise men, but also what the French call *les santons* – the little saints. Dressed in the clothing of Provence, my French manger scene has a woman carrying a baby in arms to see baby Jesus, a baker with a basket of bread, a fisherman bringing fish, *le fou* – the fool – with his arms held high, an elderly couple leaning on canes as they come together. All these village people, from their natural places of home and work in their regular clothes, make their way among the shepherds and wise men, to assemble before the newborn king.

These “little everyday saints” in my French manger scene remind me of how the story of Jesus’ birth makes room for everyone to come and worship him. It may have been just Mary and Joseph who were there that first Christmas when Jesus was born, and a little later the shepherds from the fields led by angel choruses to see this thing that had happened. But when the Magi got there – tradition holds some months later – this little, intimate family story of new birth – was opened up for all the world to see.

Those Magi – the Wise Men from afar – when they came past Herod looking for a newborn king, they represented the world, the Gentile nations far from the little Jewish province of Bethlehem. They are the ones who invite us into the nativity scene. The important thing the Magi teach us is not just where they came from, but how they departed and made their way home. By another way – Matthew tells us. Not past the palace of Herod who sat enthroned upon the power of oppression and cruelty. Warned in a dream to avoid Herod’s evil plot to do the new king in, they went home a different way from the way they came.

That’s how it is supposed to be for us too. Once you have been to the manger, and knelt before the Christ Child, you are never the same again. Once you see that the Great God of all creation is born among us, God’s love for the world appearing in the ordinary lives of ordinary people, you go home a different way. You walk by a light not of this world. William Placher, a distinguished biblical scholar and theologian, has written: “When most Christians reflect on God becoming human in Jesus Christ, they don’t think about theories of the Incarnation – but about the Christmas stories. We may not understand the relationship of the divine nature to the human nature in the ‘Christ event’ – as the academics call it – but,” Placher concludes, “we remember Mary and Joseph and the baby, the shepherds and wise men.” We remember their simple story that changed the course of human history forever.

It was St. Francis of Assisi who first created a live nativity in 1223 in a humble outdoor setting. People loved it and came from miles around to see it. Before Francis assembled his live nativity, using a real infant as baby Jesus, the Christ child in pre-Renaissance paintings always featured him looking very much like a little adult. He sat upright on his mother’s lap, sometimes with an orb in hand as if he were surveying his kingdom. His head was small, compared to a real baby’s head and his features looked

serious and grown up. After St. Francis created a live nativity scene, artistic depictions of Jesus began to change to look more like a baby. St. Francis reminded his neighbors that Jesus was born like every baby, and was weak and helpless and dependent on his mother and father. His nativity scene brought the story to life so that people could understand how God comes to us where we are weak and helpless and dependent. And once we have knelt before God's love for us in Christ, we too go home a different way.

You remember it was St. Francis of Assisi who also penned the prayer that speaks of the kind of difference Jesus makes in our lives: Lord, make me an instrument of thy peace, where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; and where there is sadness, joy ... For it is in giving that we receive. It is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. St. Francis understood how coming to the manger of the Lord changes us, how it makes us more Christ-like in how we live, how we too go home by another way.

A couple of weeks ago, Garrison Keillor told a story of another live nativity scene in his News from Lake Wobegon on A Prairie Home Companion His story went like this: The living nativity returned to Our Lady of Perpetual Responsibility this last week. Last Sunday out in front of the church. They have that enormous crèche with the moving parts. There's one cow that switches its tail, and the infant turns its head and holds up a hand and the Blessed Virgin bows slightly, but those moving parts aren't moving anymore.

So ... Sister Arvon decided to have a living nativity and to go out and recruit. She went to the youth group in the Catholic Church and found young people who she could bend to her will. She found Linda MacAdance to be the Blessed Virgin and Carl Schopenhauer to be Joseph. Those are the two for which you have certain unspoken standards – the Blessed Virgin Mary and Joseph. In a small town people know who qualifies for that and who does not. So they were all set and there were some llamas who appeared in the role of camels, and some real sheep who were there who didn't really want to be there but there they were, and all sorts of children stuffed full of sweets. And shepherds were there – you don't care about their character whatsoever. They wore the big robes just as they did in scripture. Some of them brought things to drink under those robes to keep them warm, if you know what I mean. The angels came in rhinestones and feathers and so it was very festive. It was really very lovely. People drove up, and parked, and came in drinking hot chocolate and stood around the scene. The Wise Men brought gifts of coffee and figs and chocolate and cookies which Mary and Joseph really enjoyed.

And it was a beautiful thing as the sun went down. There wasn't a fence around it or anything, so people just walked right into the nativity scene. They visited with one another; they just walked right in and they talked to the Blessed Virgin Mary and Joseph. It was lovely until the fire station siren went off, and two of the Wise Men had to run for it and some of the men who were watchers as well and they dispersed in a hurry. After that, people were wondering: Well... how does this end? Where does this end? What's the end of the story when there's no curtain to come down? They were right there in our midst. What's the end of the story? Keillor muses: Well that's something we've been trying to figure out for two thousand years, isn't it? (1)

What's the end of the story? It is a story that does not end. We who have seen the star, and heard the angels sing, are called to participate in this birth – called to be instruments of God's peace, love, faith, hope, light and joy. The God we see revealed in Jesus is the way – a new way – to a different kind of life, a changed perspective, a more promising future. God will

3

not change the world without our human participation in it. God gave us Jesus to show us the way into a story that never, ever ends.

AMEN.

NOTES

1) News from Lake Wobegon, broadcast on Prairie Home Companion, 12/10/11.