

Christmas Stations of the Cross

A sermon based on Mark 1:1-8 and Isaiah 40:1-11

Don Friesen
Ottawa Mennonite Church
December 5, 1999

One of the more popular items at Ten Thousand Villages sales are crèches—manger scenes depicting the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. For years our sales have carried olive wood crèches from the West Bank, which have been joined by wooden crèches from Tanzania and El Salvador; felt crèches from Nepal; clay crèches from Bangladesh; and brass crèches from Cameroon. Jane Snider told me that one customer came to the Villages store last week and purchased almost a thousand dollars worth of crèches, to add to her collection of over 300 crèches!

Now, some people—perhaps frustrated Advent preachers—thumb their noses at these sentimental nativity scenes. Crèches often convey a domesticated image of a cozy barn with a beautiful baby safely born, who is surrounded by adoring parents, non-smelling animals, tame angels, and non-swearing shepherds. They suggest that Christmas and crèches are so popular because the infant Jesus is safer than the adult Jesus. Baby Jesus, cooing in the manger, isn't going to storm in, beat the ushers with whips, and sweep the offering plates off the altar. Baby Jesus, "gentle and mild" in Mary's arms, isn't going to upset our apple cart, and having himself received valuable gifts from Asian VIP's, he isn't going to burst our bubble by commanding us to sell all we have and give it to the poor! We love Baby Jesus, all wrapped in swaddling clothes, and we sing him lullabies to keep him quiet: "Sleep in heavenly peace!" No crying he makes; no commandments, for us to break!

Well, I don't know. Sure, some of the crèche scenes may be a touch sentimental, but even when their makers take license to portray what was probably a foul-smelling barn in a cold and dangerous place, the adoration of the Christ Child conveyed in manger scenes, and the peace of those in attendance, is a valid dimension of our Christmas worship. The prophet Isaiah uses similar "domesticated" images when speaking of salvation, saying, "Comfort, ...comfort my people.... Speak tenderly to Jerusalem...." (40:1-2) The message is one of concern for their suffering, God feeling that they've suffered enough! (40:2) God wants to remove obstacles from their path, says Isaiah. (40:3-4) Your Saviour is coming (40:9), he says, "He will feed his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms, and carry them in his bosom, and gently lead the mother sheep." (40:11) Fairly domesticated and peaceful images, I'd say, and indicative of that for which we yearn. As G.K. Chesterton wrote, in a poem:

"There fared a mother driven forth
Out of an inn to roam;
In the place where she was homeless
All men are at home."
("House of Christmas")

But have you noticed that John the Baptist isn't included in any Nativity set? say the critics. Why isn't the camel-haired, grasshopper-chomping, blunt-spoken John the Baptist in any crèche set? Well, for one thing, John the Baptist was only about six months older than the infant Jesus, and I doubt that on the day of Jesus' birth he was talking, or eating grasshoppers, or wearing camel hair diapers!

Facts don't always influence popular mythology, however, and some contend that perhaps it isn't so much John the Baptist's unusual appearance or demeanour that keeps him out of crèches but his message! The focal point of his message is repentance (Mark 1:4), and when asked by the people what this repentance involved, what they should "do," he responded: "Whoever has two coats must share with anyone who has none; and whoever has food must do likewise." (Luke 3:11) When tax collectors showed up and asked what they should do, John told them, "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you." (3:13) In other words, "Don't make people pay more than they owe." (3:13, CEV) And when some Roman soldiers came and asked John what they should do, he replied, "Do not extort money from anyone by threats or false accusation, and be satisfied with your wages." (3:14)

Interesting, isn't it, that all of his answers to questions about repentance are framed in economic terms. And who can forget John's confrontation with the mighty Herod, who had committed adultery, incest, murder, and God knows what else, and John the Baptist went to him and said, "Shape up! Your lifestyle is going to bring down the whole nation!"

I don't have any problem with the serenity of crèche scenes—Jesus came among us, after all, to bring us peace, deep peace, peace in all of the full-orbed meaning of the Hebrew word, "shalom". The birth of the Bethlehem Child signals the arrival of the Prince of Peace, who will establish peace at all levels—in our hearts, in our families, in our communities, in our churches, in provinces, nations, and in the world!

I daresay that if you look closely at the manger scene you will notice John the Baptist standing in the shadows, for the Gospel writers position Jesus squarely in the movement founded by John. And you will notice that across the serenity of the manger lies the shadow of the cross. In the shadows behind the crèche are images of Jesus praying in Gethsemane, Jesus forsaken by his followers, Jesus dying on the cross.

One of the oldest expressions of Christian devotion, more attuned to the season of Lent, of course, is something called the Stations of the Cross, the Via Dolorosa. These stations are a series of pictures representing various scenes in Christ's Passion. Usually positioned at intervals around the walls of a church, they depict biblical incidents like the moment when Christ is condemned to death; when the cross is laid upon him; when he meets the women of Jerusalem; when he is stripped of His garments; and so on.

The Stations of the Cross developed over time to help the faithful make a pilgrimage, in spirit, to the scenes of his suffering and death, and this is carried out by passing from station to station, and praying at each one. This expression of Christian devotion has its origin in the Holy Land, where the stations were reverently marked out from the earliest times, and to walk the Via Dolorosa in Jerusalem has been the goal of pious pilgrims ever since the days of Constantine!

Perhaps it is unfortunate that we don't have a parallel expression of piety during Advent, for if the Stations of the Cross lead one, spiritually, to the final scene on Golgotha, a similar spiritual exercise in Advent might lead us, spiritually, to that final scene of peace and contentment in Bethlehem.

Now, someone has suggested that Christians of today are notorious for joining the rest of our culture in another exercise of piety known as the Stations of the Crass. (Joe Dominguez and Vicki Robin's "Your Money or Your Life"). And that instead of our souls being renewed and inspired, we grow increasingly tired and irritable as we make our pilgrimages to fourteen or more malls and shops, there to lay down tribute to the god of

Mammon! The Stations of the Cross don't lead to the serenity of the Bethlehem crèche. It also doesn't help to clutter up the season with a frenetic round of parties and tasks.

Perhaps we do have an Advent counterpart to the Stations of the Cross, however, for each Sunday during Advent we touch down upon some predictable stops on the way to Bethlehem. Advent always begins with an announcement of Christ's Second Coming, lending perspective to our Christmas observance, for it reminds us that the birth of the Christ Child is just the beginning of something that projects far, far beyond even Calvary and Christ's resurrection!

On our Advent journey to Bethlehem we also invariably stop to ask John the Baptist for directions. All four gospels lead us past John the Baptist. The Gospel of Matthew begins with genealogy and a birth story, but by chapter 3 John the Baptist is on the scene, calling for repentance. The Gospel of Luke also begins with a birth story—two birth stories, in fact—but the first story is of the birth of John the Baptist! And by chapter 3 of the same Gospel John the Baptist is once again on the scene, calling for repentance! The Gospel of John begins with an elegant prologue, but by chapter 3 of John's Gospel the Baptist is again on the scene, calling for repentance! In fact, he is mentioned in the prologue as well. The Gospel of Mark begins his Gospel more abruptly, with no birth story, no animals, no shepherds—but John the Baptist appears already in verse four of the first chapter!

All four Gospels point to Christ, but to get there they all lead us through the River Jordan, a Christmas Station of the Cross, if you will, and one that can keep us from bowing too low at the Stations of the Cross. The penitential colouring of this station on the way to Bethlehem reminds us to start doing the things we know we should do. If you are alienated from someone, reconcile with them. If you are self-righteous in relation to somebody, humble yourself. If you've been uncaring about the poor, fire up your moral indignation—and imagination—and do something about it! If you've been neglectful of your family, start paying attention to them. If you've filled your life with acquisitions and clutter, jettison some of them. And if we've assumed to this point that we are going to be judged on our ability to avoid evil in this life, perhaps it's time for us to hear that we're going to be judged on our courage to do the good.

Christmas has been tainted by the crass, but Advent has not. Someone has suggested that the Advent season is ours alone. It has no competition, for "one cannot make a growth industry out of Advent expectations." (Peter Gomes, chapel minister, Harvard) It's the season that awakens expectations that transcend materialism and a season that emphasizes waiting for God. This is not merely a waiting around for something interesting to happen, but waiting as farmers do, for they work for that which they wait. Waiting alone will not do. Working for the sake of keeping busy will not do. Working for that which we wait, that is the essence of our peculiar Advent hope.

May this season afford you some opportunities to go nowhere and do nothing—do nothing but focus on that for which we wait, so that we may be inspired to work towards its realization.

All quotations of Scripture, unless otherwise noted, are from the New Revised Standard Version.