

A Very Messy Christmas

Merry Christmas to everyone here! I hope this Christmas season is going well for you. I know many of you probably have a family celebration coming up. You're going to have dinner, open some gifts, play some games with family. That's great stuff.

And I know there are different types of people here tonight. I know many of you are eager to get on dinner and gift exchange and you're tolerating this service because there's someone in the family who roped you into coming here and you want to keep the peace. Besides, you've been here before and you kind of like the music, but you're looking at your watch—how long is this service anyway? I wish I had a crying child to take out to the Commons.

I know there are others, either you're a regular at Cross Culture Community Church or Waite Park Church you love Christmas Eve service and there is no place you'd rather be tonight than right here!

But there's also a third type of person. You are really uncomfortable right now and you're thinking to yourself—what am I even doing here right now? This is totally not my thing. I can think of a lot of places I'd rather be right now, than here in this church. Like the DMV...or prison...the gates of Mordor...or Ikea on Saturday afternoon. Yes, I know!

A few years ago, a couple from the church I was in at the time invited a friend to church. His name was Mike and he was a rough dude. He'd done a lot of drugs, been in

jail, the whole story. When they came, I was standing by the door and I noticed that before he came in the door of the church, he paused for a minute and took a deep breath. I didn't say anything to him but later I asked his friends, why he did that. They said he was genuinely afraid he'd be struck dead when he stepped through the door.

A few years later another guy started coming to church. He was single and lonely and was in recovery for sex addiction. He was doing really well and was an important part of the community. But after he'd come for a couple of years, he disappeared. He didn't answer his phone—he'd just dropped off the map.

A few months later, I was walking out of our local grocery store, when I met him coming into the store. When I saw him, I gave him a hug and asked him how he was doing. We chatted a while and I said, "Phil, we've really missed you the last few months."

He said, "To be honest, I've missed the church, too."

I said, "Hey, why don't come back. You know you're always welcome."

And I'll never forget what he said to me. He said, "Yes. I do plan on coming back sometime. There are just some things I need to get straightened out first." I haven't seen him since.

I have to be honest, those responses are heart-breaking to me. Now, I don't blame Mike and Phil for that. It's not their fault. They had simply absorbed the idea that God would only accept them if they had their lives cleaned up. Somehow, they got the message that the church is the place for people who have their stuff together. And I want

to say tonight that, if that's the message you've gotten from the church, I'm so, so, sorry. If you have somehow thought, "I don't belong here because I'm not holy enough, not sober enough, not judgmental enough, not rich enough, not put together enough, have too many questions and too many doubts," I just want to say to you, "I'm sorry and I'm glad you're here."

So, how do people get that message? Well, I wonder if some of it comes from Christians who try to clean up Scripture in our heads. We somehow think that Jesus walked around with a gold halo, keeping his distance from messy people. But to read the Bible that way misses the point.

For instance, let's look at the last passage we read tonight—from Luke 2. It's the part about the angels appearing to the shepherds, who then go see Jesus. My guess is that when we think about this story, we envision a kids Christmas program. The shepherds are ten-year-olds with towels tied on their heads. Mary is wearing a sheet and she's holding a doll—because "the little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes." In fact, *everyone* is silent except the narrator and all the actors move to their spots on cue. But let's take another look and see what's really happening. And I think what you'll find is that, whoever you are, the story is a bit more relevant than you've been led to believe. I hope this isn't too shocking.

Let's start in verse 6. Mary and Joseph made it to Bethlehem and found a place to stay. It was either a barn or a cave...and there were probably animals around. Here's

what is says, **“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth...”** OK, let’s stop there for just a minute. Already, this should dispel any notion that things are neat and tidy.

Anyone ever been there at the birth of a child? Let me just say, childbirth is not how they show it on TV, is it? It’s very bloody. It’s messy. It’s intense. There’s a cord...and a placenta. I know that we’d rather think of the birth of God incarnate as a miracle where he just appeared in a professionally staged manger, neat and clean and quiet, with a perfectly shaped head and a golden fleece diaper. But that’s not what happened.

In fact, Jesus was born into a situation that was worse than any of us. The room wasn’t even sanitary. There wasn’t hospital staff there to tidy things up and mop. This was a barn or a cave—straw everywhere and now it was straw with blood. How do you clean that up? OK, sorry, this is getting a little graphic—but that’s the point. Think about it...in the Biblical story, that’s how God entered the world. God was present there.

Ready to move on? Verse 8, **“And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.”** OK, let’s talk about the shepherds.

Now, shepherds weren’t ten-year-olds with towels tied around their heads. In fact, to the Romans, shepherds were the equivalent of modern-day carnival workers. They were generally people who were trying to get away from society. They probably had a sordid past and were basically dirty and smelly since they spent all their time with animals.

This is what Aristotle said about shepherds, “...laziest are shepherds, who lead an idle life, and get their subsistence without trouble from tame animals; their flocks, having to wander from place to place in search of pasture, they are compelled to follow them, cultivating a living farm...” At best, shepherds were regular Joes, at worst, they were peasants at the lowest rung of society.

So, think about this for a minute. People typically don't send birth announcements randomly. They send them to the people they want to know about the birth. We send birth announcements to people we love.

I can think of any number of people God could have sent angels to announce the birth of Jesus—the Emperor, King Herod, maybe the high priest. But he didn't. In fact, he hid the birth from Herod. Instead, of all the people in the world, God sent a choir of angels to a bunch of shepherds while they were at work.

Now, if shepherds were the carnival workers of the ancient world, when an angel appeared, I doubt they broke into hymns. It's more likely that you would have to bleep out their initial response. They see a flash of light and startled, they probably said something like, “What the bleep is that?” That's never been a part of any Christmas program I've seen. When the rest of the choir of angels jumped in, I'm sure it was spectacular, but it's unrealistic to think these guys would have responded the way we typically imagine them responding.

It says then that the angels left. I don't really know how that happened. Were they singing and glowing one minute and all the sudden they were gone? Or did they hang out for a while and chat with the Shepherds after the concert. "Hey Angel Jim, it was great to meet you. We'll get tickets for the show next time you're in town."

In any case, when they left, I doubt the shepherds knew what to do. Again, I can imagine them standing there amazed that they had just seen an angel choir. And I suspect when you see something like that, it's really hard to go back to tending sheep. So, one of them says, "Soooo...you want to go see?"

"Really? Why?"

"Well, the angel did tell us where this baby would be. Seems like he wanted us to go."

"Yeah, but we're shepherds! What about the sheep?"

"Oh, they'll be here when we get back."

"OK, what the heck. Let's do it."

Now again, we've been influenced by Christmas programs so we don't think this is weird, but what if you just had a baby and a bunch of construction workers showed up in the recovery room? "Hey, we were just working in the new wing of the hospital and we heard you just had a baby! Congratulations!" It might be a little awkward. So, don't you think it might have been just a tiny bit awkward for some shepherds to show up? But that's what they did.

In Christmas programs, all the actors are silent, but have you ever wondered about what the conversation was like? There's a knock on the door (if there was a door) and Mary looks at Joseph.

"Who is it?"

"It's a bunch of shepherds?"

"Umm, I just had a baby, could you come back another time?"

"Well, you see, there was a choir of angels that told us about the baby. They said we could find him here."

Mary thinks to herself, "I'm gonna kill that Gabriel!" Then she says, "Angels, huh? And what were their names?"

"Uh, they didn't say."

"Are you sure they were angels?"

"Pretty sure. Anyway, they said something about a Savior being born, but that he was lying in a feeding trough...Is your baby in a trough?"

And that sealed it. They went in and saw the baby. Mary and Joseph and the shepherds swapped angel stories and in that moment, they were reminded of how a bunch of ordinary, imperfect people got to be part of something that changed the world forever. It was messy. It was awkward. People didn't automatically know how to respond or even how to process. And that was OK.

Well, I hope you get the point. I don't think it's helpful to clean up the Biblical stories because when we do, we start to think that the people in the stories are different than you and me. We think they're wiser, more disciplined and to be honest, it makes people think the story of God working with people is only for the extraordinary people, not the regular, every day, messy people like you and me. It makes the Mikes and Phils of the world feel like if they don't have their lives together, God will reject them or that they need to have their life sorted out before they can be a part of the Church.

But when we read the Christmas story (and actually, Jesus' whole life and ministry) with our eyes open, we'll see that Jesus didn't come for the people who have their life together, he came specifically for the people who believe God doesn't care about them and could never love them. Christmas is the story of God entering into our messy, awkward and confused world and showing us that no matter where we are in life God is willing to meet us there.

You see, the good news of Jesus isn't that God reluctantly accepts sinners or that he only loves people who do the right thing. But the central point of Christmas is that even when we couldn't get things right, God willingly entered our mess.

So, what does that mean for you? If you're here tonight and are mildly interested, but don't really get into church or think much about Jesus, I want to challenge you take another look at Jesus. Maybe he's not as irrelevant as you've been led to believe.

If you're one of those who—and you love to be here—and you're committed to Jesus, I want this to be a reminder to you that God's love for you isn't based on the fact that you're a good person. Of course, God wants you to be a good person, but it's so easy for people who mostly have our lives together (or can fake it really well) to become a bit judgmental of people who don't.

Let this be a call to you, to follow Jesus' example and be willing to enter other people's mess. Don't insulate yourself from suffering or keep people you deem to be "sinners" at arms-length. But no matter where people are, no matter what they've done, you can be the presence of God to them.

And if you're here and you don't want to be here because you don't think you belong. You don't think God is interested in you, or maybe you feel like there are just a few things you need to get cleaned up first, I want you to hear that God sees you, he knows you and he loves you. He wants you to know him and he is willing to enter your life in the middle of your doubt, confusion, anger, sadness, shame and mess. And he doesn't do it reluctantly, THIS is the core message of Christmas—God entering our mess.

On your program, there's a tear-off card that we've asked everyone to fill out. Whoever you are, if there's something you've heard tonight or if you've experienced God in some way and you'd like to talk to a pastor, before you hand it in, just write—I'd like to talk to someone and we'll get in touch with you.