



“Born in a Barn”

***The Rev. Dr. Arlene K. Nehring
Eden United Church of Christ
Hayward, California***

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Luke 2:8–12 (NRSV)***

Eden’s Board of Trustees met this past week. Among other things, we discussed plans for today’s live nativity. I observed that the live nativity was either the smartest idea or the dumbest idea that I’ve had in years.

Until about Tuesday of this week, when the weather forecast was posted and the Trustees were meeting, opinions were tilting toward “smartest” but, since the rain started on Friday, opinions may have shifted.

If you think that the live nativity is a smart idea, please thank the Trustees and my new best friends, the Palomares 4-H Club, for their energy, imagination, and implementation of this event. If you think that the live nativity is a dumb idea, then the buck stops here.

Why a live nativity at Eden Church? Why, in particular, in this inclement weather, did the pastor hold out for a live nativity? These and other mysteries will be resolved today.

You may ask, “Is she crazy? [Let’s forgo a show of hands.] Is this a publicity stunt? Is Arlene homesick for Iowa? Or is she trying to remind passersby that Christmas is more about what happened at the manger than what’s happening at the mall?”

II

The idea for a live nativity at Eden Church first came to me when I was given a tour of the campus when I arrived here to interview many years ago. At the time, the narthex doors and stone floor had been installed, but the landscaping hadn’t yet been planted and the cement hadn’t yet been poured.

I remember surveying the expansive entrance and the overhang on the roof, and saying to the chair of the search committee, Sandy Nachand, “Hey, this would be the perfect place for a live nativity.” That was more than eight years ago. Today is our first attempt at a live nativity. I don’t give up easily.

For those who are wondering about the publicity stunt option, well, the answer is, “Partly yes.” The live nativity is partly a publicity stunt.

The marketing consultant who we hired a few years ago—Allan Mann—was fond of telling us, “Eden Church can either make the news or buy the news. Making the news usually gets you better placement in the press, and it’s more in your price range.” So we have tried to follow Allan’s advice and make the news rather than buy it.

We are grateful today for the coverage that the “San Lorenzo Patch,” a new local paper, has given us for this event and to reporter Erin Ashley Duncan who ranked our live nativity among the top five things to do in the East Bay this weekend.¹ Considering that Erin is a 20-something person—and I’m 40-something and my coolness factor drops with every birthday, and considering that there are numerous offerings in our area this weekend—I figure that it’s high praise to have an event at Eden Church ranked in the top five things to do in the East Bay this weekend.

Don’t be surprised if you see a photographer or two around today taking a picture for the local papers who have expressed interest in our event.

For those wondering if I am homesick for Iowa, I will say that it has always been a hardship to live far away from my family. I do miss my relatives—virtually all of whom are farmers or ranchers, and I especially miss them during the holidays. Christmas without farm chores has always seemed a bit odd to me, as a farm kid, and I do miss living in the country. But I have found that God has a sense of humor, and keeps calling me to urban ministries.

Finally, for those who have hypothesized that the nativity is an invitation to discover the deeper meaning of Christmas, well, you, too, are right. But, I would add, the original and deeper meanings of Christmas have to do with more than farm animals and the twenty-first century equivalent of a “Christmas petting zoo.”

The deeper meanings of Christmas have to do with the fact—especially as Luke tells the Christmas story—that God came to earth to proclaim to the least, the last, and the lost that God is love—and that God’s love was meant for them, for us. This truth is punctuated by the characters that depict the Christmas story in Luke’s gospel.

III

Those who attended our Advent Bible Study in November will remember that the Christmas story as we have received it and remember it from our childhoods is primarily a conflation of two very different Christmas stories found in the Bible—one found in the gospel of Matthew and the other found in the gospel of Luke.

On Christmas Eve, we add a few verses from John’s gospels to the story about Jesus being the light of the world when we light our “Silent Night” candles. So that in the

¹ <http://sanlorenzo.patch.com/articles/overheard-on-friday-weve-got-your-wet-weekend-covered>

broadest sense, the Christmas story as we know it and associate it with the pageants of our youth is a conflation of the gospel stories, with some folk wisdom stirred in. If you doubt the part about folk wisdom, I'll give you until the end of the worship service to find an inn keeper in your pew Bibles. Ready, go!

The story in Matthew emphasizes the role of the kings, and the story in Luke emphasizes the role of the marginalized, particularly women and the poor, and the work of the Holy Spirit, which is portrayed by the angels. For Luke, the shepherds and Elizabeth and Mary symbolized the poor and marginalized of first century Palestine.

Most of us likely understand that modern Christianity grew out of ancient patriarchal cultures in which women were largely subordinate to men, and that our beliefs and values have evolved to incorporate more nuanced understandings of the genders and gender roles, but we modern people may not be as familiar with the role that shepherds played in early first century Palestine and all that they symbolized in those days.

New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, writing in their book, *The First Christmas*, explain that "As a class, shepherds [were] even lower in the social order than peasants..."²

Another source explains that shepherds, in Jesus' day, were often the youth or elders in a family who were unable to perform more demanding tasks, or they were the younger sons of peasant farmers who did not inherit land, and who had to make their living by working for more prosperous farmers who could pay wages in exchange for their labor.³

Another New Testament scholar, Gerald Mattingly, explains in his article about shepherds in biblical times that they often lived very solitary lives far from home and family, and their work was very dangerous. Shepherds, he explained, faced numerous threats including wild animals and thieves, and they endured harsh weather with little protection from the elements. Their shelter from the storms was a heavy cloak, and their only protection from wild animals and thieves was a staff, a rod, and a sling with some small stones.⁴

To add to this picture of first century shepherds, it may be helpful to realize, too, that shepherds were not necessarily the most welcome visitors to a village in ancient times, because they smelled like the livestock that they cared for, and didn't have much opportunity to bathe.

Mindful of who the shepherds were in first century Palestine, and that Luke saw marginalized people, symbolized in the shepherds, as the target audience for his Christmas story, we discover anew that the barn birth we celebrate this week is about a God who breaks through the lofty heavens and enters our earthly, earthy lives, where babies are born and animals dwell, where the poor and dispossessed huddle in

²Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 2007), p. 48.

³<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shepherd>

⁴Harper's Bible Dictionary (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985) p. 942.

makeshift abodes, and where the hardships of our lives are the most real and the most raw.

So that's what the fuss is about. That's why we bothered with a live nativity today—even in the rain. That's why Christ was born in a barn. So that we might know that there is no creature whose life is beyond the realm of God's concern, no hell too deep, and no stench too strong that God would not come and dwell with us, and lead us to a better day. This is the gospel truth. This is what Christmas is all about. Merry Christmas. Amen.