

“Where is God in all this Mess?”

Advent 4B

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It was Advent several years ago, and a pastor friend was hoping to counter all the commercial Christmas frenzy swirling about his children, and to teach them what the season was all about. So he sat down at the kitchen table with his young child in the middle of December and they began the project of assembling a cardboard cutout nativity scene: stable, manger, baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, sheep, cows, shepherds, and the magi. “Fold on the dotted line,” the directions said, “Place tab A in slot B,” etc.

Easier read than done, of course, and within a few minutes, it was a disaster. Nothing worked as intended. Nothing looked like the picture on the box. The Pastor dad had all but taken over, but he fared no better than his four-year-old partner. The kitchen table was littered with torn, bent, spineless figures just wilting over. Pieces were frayed and taped together. The father in his frustration was close to clearing the table and trashing the whole thing. And the little boy was less than impressed.

So surveying the scene on the table, the four-year-old who was supposed to be learning the real meaning of Christmas – that Jesus is God’s son – said, “So, Daddy, where is God in this mess?”

A poignant Christmas memory, which also remains the quintessential Advent question: Where exactly is God, in all this mess?

“Somewhere someone set up half the night last night – a longtime dedicated employee whose job was eliminated before the end of the fiscal year: “Where is God,” they wondered, “amidst this disruption?”

Somewhere a spouse grips the hand of their beloved, awaiting news of diagnosis: “Where is God,” they wonder, “in this uncertainty?”

Somewhere, a family gathers around the bed of a loved one at the end of their long journey, “Where is God,” they wonder, “in the midst of our loss? Our particular grief?”¹

Or we open the paper or pull out our phones to read the news of the week, and wonder, “Where on earth is God in all of this chaos?”

Our Advent claim is that God is right here in the middle of the mess with us. And God is in the middle of the mess with Mary. The first thing the angel, Gabriel, says to Mary is “The Lord is with you.” And then he says, “Do not be afraid.” Gabriel assured Mary that God was with her, but little did she know how close, how real, and how vulnerable the God she would bear was willing to become.

¹ With gratitude to dear friend, the Rev. Alan Sherouse, for this story.

Madeleine L'Engle describes the birth of Christ in a messy world in a way that wows me every time I hear it:

He did not wait till the world was ready,
till people and nations were at peace.
He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.
He came when the need was deep and great.

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In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!

Year after year we gather to hear the story of Jesus' birth even when all the world is not sane. We raise our songs throughout Advent with joyful voice because although we know sorrow and despair and uncertainty, Love has been birthed into the messiness of our world, right into the middle of it.

So, if it seems hard to live into the joy of Christmas this year because of the heavy burdens you bear, or the messiness of your life or your family, or the pain of being physically distanced from those you love know this: God does not wait. God does not wait until the world is ready or for a perfect time or for perfect peace. God does not wait for pandemics to end. God does not wait for all the messes to be tidied up. God does not wait because "Jesus is being born where people need him most." God makes God's home in the messiest of places—a stable—in the messiest of times—under the control of the Roman Empire—and with the most ordinary of people—a teenage girl and her fiancé and the shepherds.

Jesus is being born where we need him most. In the messes. In the hard places. In the dark and desperate places. In the lonely and lost places. In the places and with the people who seem too far gone. Jesus is born into exactly those kinds of places and he spends his life with the most vulnerable and ostracized and brokenhearted of people.

And it is through the birth of this child into the mess of first-century Bethlehem and into the mess of our 2020 world that compels us to proclaim: Love is running through the streets. Emmanuel, God-with-us and God-with-skin on, God who pitched God's tent and lived among us, is here. God has become one of us. And today, despite the messes that surround us and the pain we feel, we know that God has become one of us and is in the middle of the mess with us—face mask and all. And so we raise our songs with joyful voice, for Love has come. And for this, we say, thanks be to God. Love has come...Amen.

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