

My wish for you is a Messy Christmas!

Image: Søren Kierkegaard once told a parable that is fitting to tell on Christmas Eve – *Many years ago a king fell in love with a maid. It's an old theme, on how love overcomes all barriers of class and of race and of nationality. But for all of its beauty, the king didn't see the matter easily resolved. Racking his mind and his heart was the question: How to declare his love? Unable to answer it, he summons to his palace all the wise people of his kingdom and put the question to them. As on, they responded: Sire, nothing could be easier. Your majesty has to but appear in all your glory before the humble abode of the maid and instantly she will fall at your feet and be yours.*

But it was precisely that thought which so troubled the king. In return for his love, he wanted hers, not fear that would lead to her submission. He wanted her glorification. Not his. What a dilemma when to declare your love means the end of your beloved. When not to declare your love means the end of love. Night after night the king paced the floor of his palace pondering, until at last he saw love's truth: freedom for the beloved demands equality with the beloved. So late one night, long after his counselors had returned to their chambers, the king stole out of the side door of the palace and appeared before the humble abode of the maid dressed in the garb of a servant. He comes to us as one of us.

Immediacy/Indwelling: Sometimes when I look at what we do with Christmas it is just the opposite – we make it so imaginary. Christmas cards and specials give us glimpses of a flawless Mary in pristine wrinkle free clothing, a steady and unperturbed Joseph in an equally immaculate robe, a cheerful stable with clean straw and friendly animals, and the arrival of shepherds in newly laundered snow white tunics with dirt-free sandals on their feet. But the Gospel of Luke is far messier! Mary isn't even officially married to Joseph; yet she is pregnant; they have traveled from Nazareth to Bethlehem over 40 miles through Samaritan and Judean Hills that are not the safest areas to travel. Mary goes into labor in Bethlehem – but there is no proper room or bed for her; she gives birth – never an easy process under the best of circumstances and has to lay her

firstborn infant not in a cradle built by grandpa but a feeding trough. In the middle of the night shepherds burst in upon them, people who smell like wood smoke and sweat and sheep, still shocked by what they saw in the sky. Joseph must have been on edge because these men were not the most welcomed intruders because word on the street was they were rough and dangerous! The true Christmas story seems to be messy. If we quickly put ourselves into this situation; we sense pretty quickly it is no glittering Christmas card. It is real life...messy.

Imitation: Christmas came to a family this year in an unexpected place. There was a young couple who I met this past fall. He was working at a restaurant for minimum wages his fiancée was a very young woman in her last four weeks of pregnancy – they were force to move out of their residence, close to homeless they were totting a three-year-old. Burrowed into a motel room on the eastside of Stoughton with all their belongings and scraping enough money to purchase a bit of food from Quick Trip. The money ran out when they called and we helped them with to stay in that motel for another 10 days. After that they connected to START and together we began to build connections for a to move into an upper flat, others helped her find a job in a medical facility after the baby was born and saw to it that they had enough to eat in a healthy way with fresh food. It was in the lives of this young couple and their precious children that you begin to see the real meaning of Christmas. Praying with a young couple who just miscarried a child—you begin to see the real meaning of Christmas. In the voices of a few people from our congregation who stood up against the payday loan outfit that financially preyed on a vulnerable and desperate young man, you begin to see the real meaning of Christmas. Hunger is not far from the children of Stoughton. Three years ago the % of children below the poverty line was a bit under 14% and three years later it is above 24%. It is here with children who are hungry that the real meaning of Christmas takes shape. Life for all of these people is messy!

It doesn't take long to see in our lives – even important things do not always or even usually happen exactly when and where we want them to. There can be a tendency

when things do not come together smoothly, to wonder what has gone wrong with our prayers or our relationship with God. My friends this is precisely why the “true” story of Christ’s birth is far more helpful than the parody we immerse ourselves in.

In the end: This real messy story of the birth of Jesus – the birth of God’s own son, a birth anticipated for centuries, a birth announced by a blaze of light , a birth unquestionably superintended by God himself. And what do we find? A child born out of wedlock, a rough journey, no room to breath, noise, confusion, the pain of birth unalleviated, but for Joseph. Strangers’ breaking in out of the night, yet God’s grace is accomplished. God’s grace enters the mess of the world. If God brings about his Son’s birth in such a dark and convoluted fashion – or so it appears to our eyes – may we not expect his promises to be worked out in our lives, from time to time if not frequently in a similar fashion? If we sanitize the Christmas story—eliminating its earthiness, pain and struggle we miss the truth of a God who deeply loves us. The birth of Jesus is the moment God came to dwell in our midst, to join us in our struggle. Because therein lies a clue to the mystery. Had he come to us as he deserved, in royal clothes, surrounded by nobility, he would have remained a distant God. But because of the mess at Bethlehem we have close God who understands our struggles.

Søren Kierkegaard told the story of the king who became a peasant in order to gain love from the maiden. He gives up many things to accomplish this. The King was not the King *among* people, but the King *with* people. He had to deal with everything the people dealt with. This is Christ, God himself, coming down to earth to be God *with* us-- Emmanuel. Tonight we enter God’s love story and **people who love people like God loves people are attracted to those who suffer, who struggle, and who are despised. They are people who are willing to enter the mess and get a little dirty themselves.** Deep in the mess we know a love that is reciprocal.

The angel said: **“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you; you will find a child wrapped in bands of**

cloth and lying in a manger.” And in the mess, they hear the angel proclaim: “Here is the Good News of Christmas our God embraces our mess. This infant child come into your life no matter how messed up it may be. That’s God’s signature. His sign, God doesn’t care how messy your life is. Your mess does not scare God at all. When we pause and reflect we see that Jesus started his life in a mess, wrapped in rags and placed in a manger and he ended his life in a mess, wrapped in rags after being hung on a cross.

The Good News truly is God comes into our mess with hope, presence, and a promise that God loves so much that he is willing to be where we are. It is like the carol O Little Town of Bethlehem: “...the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight!” It is here where we say I love you Lord Jesus and the King hears our voices and receives this gift with Joy! I wish you a Merry Messy Christmas!