

The Rev. Michael Barham
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The Parish of St. Clement

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There's a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in

Leonard Cohen

The king has a tiny little chip on his crown. The angel's wing has a small rough spot where a smooth feather should be carved. Each year, as I unwrap the pieces of my nativity scene, I discover that no matter how well I wrapped them, a tiny new flaw has found its way into one of the figurines. I always wonder if this will be the year I lose the tiny baby, and have to take one of the plastic "king cake" babies I use at *Mardi Gras* to fill the *puka*. This year, thumbing the edges of the figurines' phantom limbs, I had a little reverie as the images of many different manger scenes came to mind.

I thought of the Spanish moss roof on my grandmother's and how it would come loose leaving bald spots on the manger's roof. I thought of the all-white ceramic nativity my mother received as a gift, which she would surround with garland and white candles where it sat on the mantel as though in a deep forest illuminated by twinkling stars. I remembered the "living manger scene" back home in Mississippi with real sheep and a fake infant. Into my mind leapt images of the kitty-cat theme manger in Rev. Liz's office, of distinctly African figures gracing the batik from Kenya, olive wood from Palestine, sandstone from Panama, crystal from Ireland, and even a silver-colored plastic nativity covered with a confetti blizzard inside a snow-globe.

One of my favorite recent discoveries was a nativity set on sale in a store in "Little Italy," on a trip to New York. A disproportionately tall replica of Michelangelo's David stood with his head cocked to the side, as though disdainful of the lowly circumstances of the birth of his progeny. Jesus was, after all, surrounded with the ridiculous, like a giant chef offering Jesus a pepperoni pizza, and the Statue of Liberty offering the light of her torch in place of a star. Napoleon Bonaparte kept watch in the back (you can see a picture on my Facebook© page).

The things people, including me, have added to crèches, with the exception of the store in New York, make them seem more real to us, or make them seem to include us. And they help us smile. All kinds emerge, like bagpipe players from Scotland, drummer boys with a 'rum-pa-pum-pum', and the occasional Star Wars© action figure.

All kinds of animals came to mind, as mismatched pieces have been added to make the menagerie grow: like owls and armadillos, bunny rabbits and *honu*, giraffes, penguins, 'hippopotamus-us-uses', and as someone told me on the way out of church this morning, worms! Thanks to a friend in Australia, my own newest addition is a duck-billed platypus with a Santa Claus hat. Now I just need a gecko! There's nothing quite like an eight inch armadillo looming over a half-inch baby Jesus. Even the *honu* in my crèche make it appear that Bethlehem was in the Galapagos Islands. A seemingly inharmonious parade made me chuckle, but it also gave me an image of God's Word who... *who* came and dwelt among us.

This mix-match plethora of animals and people reveals a truth: that the grace of reconciliation nascent in the infant is not only available to all, but in fact draws us together into a coherent cacophony that reflects the Word, Jesus Christ, dwelling in us,

this Word that is contrary to the millions of words that are filling up our time and space and cyberspace.

There is another thing I noticed emerging as a theme among all these manger memories. Every crèche I can remember from growing up had at least one piece that was broken or missing. The one I use today is a soft sandstone set, carved by artists in Panama. Over the nine years and six moves since my brother gave it to me, it has picked up a few nicks and scratches. So, from the yellowed line of glue tracing a ceramic King Balthazar's neckline, to a trunk-less Kenyan elephant, my Christmases seem accompanied by broken manger scenes.

The Word of God was pleased to dwell in a stable as a child born of Mary around 2000 years ago. I've no doubt that little makeshift nursery received visitors just as broken as the chipped sandstone characters in my living room. Just as worn and nicked and frayed and broken as we all are today. But the Word that was in the beginning was pleased to dwell among them and is pleased to dwell among *us* today. That indwelling somehow gives us power – true power – to be more than the sum of our errors, or our mistakes, or our issues, or 'extra-baggage.' That is the power to become children of God.

It would be easy to go out and buy a new nativity set and get rid of all the broken pieces, but tossing them out would be like avoiding our reality. We wouldn't just be getting rid of objects made holy by use in our private devotions, objects laden with the memories of loved ones; we would be doing what has become far too easy in our culture – disposing of broken people and avoiding them, discarding broken images of ourselves in exchange for a distorted, face-lifted version. Of course, who here hasn't had some nick or scratch in their body or soul. We wouldn't have anyone left in our lives, except our own imperfect selves if we shut out those who are different, or distasteful. No – Jesus came to be *with* broken characters, broken people, the people who know well just how much it means that God would come and live with them.

Do you know what it means that God loves you so much that God is pleased to live with you – in you? Do you know that God loves you so much, no matter how dinged up you are by life, God loves you such much that God is pleased to live with you? That is the grace and the truth that goes far beyond the law of Moses, that no matter how much darkness we face, or how much darkness in which we wittingly or unwittingly participate, God sees us not for who we've painted ourselves up to be or who we've beaten ourselves down for being. God sees us for who we actually are, beautifully and wonderfully made, endowed by our loving Creator with the power to become children of God.

Isn't that why we put up little nativity scenes at Christmas time, anyway? The stillness of the immobile figurines stands in stark contrast to the frenetic whirl around us and invites us to be still and know *God-with-us*. We struggle to achieve the perfect photo for our annual Christmas cards or letters; we shop-till-we-drop in order to acquire and consume since that's what the advertisements tell us to do. But deep down we know there is more, something beautiful still living among us. Something that is grace giving... truth telling... God revealing. Something that compels us to be grace giving, truth telling and God revealing.

Hopefully we are not drawn to nativity scenes merely because they are cute, but because we want to be able to grasp God and be grasped by God, because we want to hold and be held by our mother Jesus in the same way the mother, Mary, held her precious little baby. We need to be with Jesus - we need Jesus to be with us - more than in Holy Week when we have to walk the laborious and painful way with him. We need to press in, right up among the smelly shepherds and the perfumed wise men and all the little lowing cattle packing in around the feed trough turned crib. Because, there, peering

up at us, is hope for our future, the sign of God's presence with us in the present, and the token of God's continued commitment to a promise from centuries before – not only the promises to Abraham, but the promise to the children of Noah, that no matter how bad things got, God would look upon the rainbow and recall that love is the reason God created the world to begin with: God wants to live *with* us. God, the Word, is pleased not merely with speaking at us, but *is* pleased to become flesh and live among us, so that we can behold the fullness of God's glory.

There are a lot of traditions around the use of nativity scenes, other than just setting them around as decoration; they are for meditation and contemplation. Some delight in adding critters each year, and some put them in places of honor in a room where they spend a lot of time. Some wait to add the figure of baby Jesus until after Christmas Eve mass. In some churches, the altar party makes a 'station of the crèche' on Christmas Eve, bowing in adoration, trying to find the baby Jesus through a thick cloud of incense and a poinsettia forest.

I hope whatever traditions you have in your personal devotions during Advent, Christmas and Epiphany, that you make room for broken nativity pieces, just as much as we need to make room for broken people, and just as much we need to make room for our own brokenness. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it."

Pay attention to the cracks, because that's how the light gets in.