

Preparing the Manger

As we approach Christmas, we buy presents to give to friends and neighbors. We trim our trees and decorate our sanctuaries and homes. We fit in all the special traditions: the parade, watching Elf or Christmas Vacation, or making cookies together.

But how can we prepare to welcome Jesus, God with us, who is at the heart of the season?
How can we welcome God, the Word made flesh, into our hearts and homes?

Let's consider that with a very simple action. In the crossing and at the front there are two empty mangers. You have been given a piece of cloth if laid in that manger can form a patchwork quilt on which a baby may be laid.

Let's turn our minds from preparing for Christmas, to preparing for Jesus. When the music begins you may come forward along with the children to place your contribution in the manger to symbolize our desire to make room in our lives for Jesus and to welcome him. Then the children can stay up front for the story.

Before coming forward, first I invite you to ponder these things in your heart, like Mary.
Look at and feel the cloth- is it rough or smooth? Notice it.
Imagine a feed trough, a manger- the roughness and simplicity.
This is where God chose to be born, in the rough places, the troubled places of the world.
Imagine those places of trouble and hurt in your own life.
Imagine those places of trouble and hurt in the lives of others.
Pray about those things that the Spirit brings into your mind.....

and when you are ready, you may come and prepare a place for Jesus.

(Judy plays Away in a Manger through once before we sing.)

(Children- gather around the manger and look at it together.)

Think about what is about to happen. When we come back to worship on Christmas eve, we will celebrate the biggest birthday, Jesus' birthday. It is the world's biggest birthday party, bigger than the Super Bowl, or Fourth of July Fireworks, or a National Championship. Because God came to find us. So since it is custom to bring presents to a birthday party, what kind of presents would Jesus want?

At Gift day, we made a special gift for Jesus in our Sparkle Box. In side some of you wrote down gifts to give Jesus.

- Groceries- Christmas Dinner for a family in our town who could use a sign that someone cares
- Some of you are giving Jesus a present by giving hats and gloves to someone who may be cold and not have these things.
- Made a snowman whose hat was a pair of Christmas socks to keep them warm.
- Another person wrote, that she would give Jesus a gift by making a new friend and being a good neighbor to all.

Those are exactly the gifts that Jesus wants for his birthday- for us to love one another and to love God with all our heart, mind, and strength. This is how we get ready for Jesus.

Prayer:

Here is a place for you, Lord Jesus.

Just as our hands have made it ready, make our hearts ready to love and welcome you.

Be born again, not in a manger, but in us.

Make us your Bethlehem, where God is personal, and all things and all people, are made new. Amen.

Isaiah 7:10-16

7:10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying,

7:11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven.

7:12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test.

7:13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also?"

7:14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

7:15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good.

7:16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Matthew 1:18-25

1:18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit.

1:19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly.

1:20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit.

1:21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."

1:22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

1:23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us."

1:24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,

1:25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Proclamation of the Word

Cabin fever had set in after two days. The snow had been on the ground and school had been out. I spoke the words that all moms and dads dread.

I am soooooo bored.

I was in middle school and we had one of the biggest snow storms I remember. The initial fun of playing alone outside in the snow had worn off. The hours of listening to my albums on my stereo had worn off. So after talking to my nearest friend Lori on the phone, we hatched a plan. We would try to get to each other's house to play in the snow- a mere 3 miles or so, but harder with the ice on the roads. My mother agreed that we could hang out if her dad could get her to our house.

Lori and I set out through the woods exploring when we had a brilliant idea. "Let's go see what the Swim and Racquet club looks like covered in snow." I grew up near the little local pool and tennis club out in the country away from town. We put the "country" in country club. Soybean fields surrounded it. The York Swim and Racquet club was on a dirt road near my home. In the summers my dad mowed the areas around the fences, my brothers were life guards, and my mother was the volunteer Treasurer. I spent every day at the pool. So I guess you can say, I felt like I owned a little part of the place. I had been in the pool on the Saturday clean-up work days where members (read board members) and their free labor (read children) showed up to get the pool ready for the big opening on Memorial Day. I had scrubbed pool tiles and inhaled Chlorox, but would not fish out the dead frogs. I had limits.

Lori and I decided to check the lock on that snowy day. And the padlock had been left open. We entered the pool area. Then we decided it would be fun to walk around inside the empty pool which was all good, until we got to the deep end. All of a sudden, my friend Lori slid down the slope and into a couple of feet of frozen rain water that had collected there. She panicked. I ran and got a old broom stick. I am not sure how, maybe it was the adrenaline, but I fished her out of that frozen water while hanging onto the aluminum ladder. Lori was saved! We almost cried. We knew that God had done it. It was a miracle. Each solemn step back through the woods to my house was a prayer of thanksgiving. We confessed our sin of being too curious and a little too dangerous. My friend Lori was ok and that is what mattered. When we got home she was baptized in a warm shower- very thankful to be alive.

That was the day Lori got saved...for the thousandth time when the hand of God was working and present. Now Lori was also the most faithful Christian kid I knew. She was saved in that way we talk about in church- "Saved by grace through faith," too. But that day we were both just glad to be alive. God was with us.

Have you ever been saved? I don't mean in the way that our Baptist friends talk about it, but like God sent someone into your life who saved you - through love or intervention? through dogged belief in you or with tough and fearless commitment to you? They literally kept you from doing something stupid or destructive. Think about that.

Maybe you have felt saved by the hand of God. Maybe you lay on a stretcher after being shot at while serving overseas, or your near miss car wreck could have landed you in Lake Hartwell.

Those moments we snap to attention- extra attuned to how close a call we just had.

I know we talk about salvation in terms of eternal life, and that is important and true. At Christmas we celebrate that "Unto us a child is born, a Savior is given"...but do we really believe we need a Savior? Do we need saving?

Joseph did and Mary did, too. Here they were in a terrible predicament. We talk about first world problems. Well, Mary and Joseph had first century problems that on at least one hand, could have meant a good stoning to death for Mary if she had committed adultery. And Joseph was between a rock and hard place. The wedding license had been signed. The ring was on the finger, but they had not consummated the marriage; yet, somehow Mary was pregnant. She said it was the Holy Spirit. Joseph being a realistic, fair-minded man was weighing his options neither of which were good. Have Mary defamed and him embarrassed along with her or dismiss her quietly so as not to disgrace her publically. Rock- Hard Place- which will it be? Either way he could not go through with the marriage. This was not his child.

Joseph is not the only guy with problems...some people I have heard have found themselves with problems... more first world than first century problems...

I know parents who are so worried about their children's futures, and whether their child will be okay with his or her particular challenges.

I know baby boomers who are concerned about having enough saved for retirement and any medical crises they may face.

I know educators who are concerned about the way we provide them with the resources they need to teach all God's children.

I know healthcare workers who are worried about providing care for all God's people.

I know retirees caring for aged parents whose resources have run out, who are dependent on our social safety net, but worried that it will last.

I know people of compassion overwhelmed with the suffering of God's people and how to respond.

We do have our share of problems....

Like Joseph we weigh our options. After all his deliberations and decision to dismiss Mary quietly, the Holy Spirit disrupts and changes his plan. And the first words to Joseph, "Joseph son of David, do not be afraid..." God knows his name and knows yours as well. God assures Joseph that God is with his people, and comes in this baby named Jesus, Emmanuel. Even Joseph will be saved by His love for him.

God has a way of doing that. And God's way, while unconventional, will be the best way forward. Now I did not say, easiest way forward. It would have been easier to dismiss Mary quietly, but Joseph would have missed being a part of God's perfect plan for him, for Mary... for us. Joseph needed that disruption, an angel and messenger of God's grace.

I asked you to consider a time when you have been saved...by the intervention of a friend or the grace of God- from doing something destructive or just not living fully into what God created you to be.

I will never forget riding a bus back from a national college conference in St. Louis one year. I had a life saving experience- more emotional than physical. Fanchon Glover served as staff at my college in Student Volunteer Services and minority affairs. I was her intern for Student Volunteer Services. She saved me that day. On the bus, she began to cut up and kid me. At first I thought she was just playing around. Then she got real serious and went to preachin' like they did in her Black Baptist church.

"Laura," she said, "you have these walls around you to protect you and keep you safe. You won't let anyone in. You got to tear down those walls and open your heart. You might just get hurt. You have been wearing that armor of doing the right things, keeping it all together, and never needing anyone."

She went from playing to preaching to meddling!

She had my number. I always worked real hard to be independent. I had to grow up fast. I thought I could only count on myself and God. She was exactly right. I was embarrassed, but she gave me lots to think about. And I love her for it.

I have learned that being open to God's plan is opening your heart up to God's people. Sometimes you will be disappointed. Your heart will be broken by the things that break the heart of God. But when you are open to God's people and God's plan, God will do amazing things you never imagined. You and I may see only an either/or option and then God says, I've got another idea. Let me show you another way...my way. Just like God did with Joseph.

In the end the only thing that can save us is love... sort of like the love of a friend. Jesus said that the greatest love is this that one would lay down his life for his friends. Jesus is born so that we would know that God is with us. He saves us over and over again, and finally by love that is self-less, like the love of the dearest friend. God sends Jesus, Immanuel to say,

"I am right here with you. I love you with a fierce tenderness. And I love the world and everyone in it the same way. Do not be afraid. You, who are saved by my love, are called to serve my loving purposes. In serving me you will find salvation and love, hope, peace, joy. You will find it in laying down your life for others, serving, loving."

God saves us through Jesus not just from our problems, but in order that we might have purpose and meaning.

And that is the gift that through Mary, Joseph we are given in the gift of Jesus.

I, for one, am glad Joseph listened to the angel's message.