

**Christmas Eve 2017**  
**Church of the Holy Trinity, Middletown, CT**

Manger scenes, or crèches, like this one have become perhaps the best known Christian symbol of Christmas. We see them everywhere—not only in churches, but on town greens and in shopping malls. And perhaps you have one in your house, too.

I received the gift of a crèche from my grandparents on my second Christmas. I have it to this day. There have been many years when I have not gotten a tree at Christmas, but every year without fail I have set up this crèche. What is our fascination with this scene? Why does it hold our attention as children and as adults? **Perhaps because in one stroke God unites in this narrow space the whole reality of the world and reveals its ultimate foundation.**

In the course of my travels I have seen a lot of Renaissance art. Much of it is sacred in nature. Painting the Madonna and child seems to have been required of every artist! Probably the second most popular subject was that of the nativity. After viewing my 5,000<sup>th</sup> or so Renaissance nativity scene, it struck me that most included a broken wall motif. Once noticed, I saw it in painting after painting until it seemed as though Bethlehem had been caught in the midst of a giant urban renewal project at the time of Jesus' birth. The stable was usually found among ruins, according to these artists. What could this mean?

I finally found a book on the subject of symbolism in Renaissance art which said that the broken walls represented the fall of the Roman Empire. Apparently in Renaissance times the coming of Christ was seen as a sign of hope for a rebirth of civilization after its collapse. Hmmm. I must say that I found this answer **unsatisfying**. Years later I discovered that I was not the only person who had pondered the meaning of those ruins.

On the first Sunday in Advent in 1943, Lutheran pastor and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who would die two years later in a Nazi concentration camp, wrote to his parents from the Tegel Prison in Berlin concerning a Renaissance nativity scene painted by the German Albrecht Altdorfer. He was bothered by Altdorfer's portrayal of the Holy Family at the manger amidst the ruins of a dilapidated house. "Whatever made him do that, 400 years ago, against all tradition?" puzzled Bonhoeffer. "Perhaps Altdorfer meant to tell us, 'Christmas can, and should, be celebrated in this way, too.'"

Now that remark gave me pause. But then it began to make sense to me. For us this crèche scene has become so common, so domesticated, even so cute in some depictions, that perhaps we have lost touch with the wildness of what God was up to there—the wildness suggested by those ruins. If we can believe what the Bible says, God chose to dwell among us, as part of our human flesh, not in some neat, all wrapped up with a bow kind of way. Rather, God chose a rather mundane, messy birth to a displaced family living in the local Warming Center amid barn animals.

Christmas is not for wimps! Christmas came not to middle class people with 2.5 children and a house in the suburbs. Christmas is wild. It is given for those who need it the most—for those who have no hope. Perhaps during Renaissance times the fall of the Roman Empire was the worst catastrophe imaginable. So then, it was into the midst of that landscape of destruction that they saw Jesus' coming. But there are plenty of life-altering catastrophes from which to choose. The truth is, we have each had to rebuild when things around us have crumbled.

So today, I would say that Christmas is here for victims of violence, for those caught up in the opioid crisis, for those whose homes and livelihoods have been destroyed by hurricanes and wildfires, for those whose families are being torn apart by immigration crack-downs, for people of color, for refugees longing for safety and peace, for those who have lost loved ones, for the unemployed, for all

abused persons and—yes—for all abusers. God chose to become incarnate in order to redeem us from our sins, reconcile us to God and to restore our hope that those things are even possible.

And who knows? Perhaps it is easier for God to come into our lives through the chinks in our carefully crafted armor, through the cracks of our broken hearts, and into the rubble of our best laid plans gone wrong. Not that God needs to find an easy way to do what God is so obviously determined to do. But God desires real relationship with us, and that means that God allows us some say in the matter. Sometimes we need to realize that the walls and defenses we build, thinking they will protect us, can all be destroyed. And sometimes we need to be liberated from the things which have imprisoned us. No matter which side of them you are on, walls, you see, go against God's outrageous plan to knit us all together and to bring us to our knees at the manger.

We come to Bethlehem as did those first witnesses: as members of many families, as members of different socio-economic groups, as foreigners, as seekers, and as strangers to one another. There we behold God incarnate making holy the most humble of life circumstances, and regarding us all from that manger with the eyes of love.

Here in one stroke God unites in this narrow space the whole reality of the world and reveals its ultimate foundation. And guess what? Our ultimate foundation has nothing to do with the empires of this world which rise and fall. It has no relation to any of those things our world values as "leading indicators." Rather, it has to do with living in right relationship with one another and being willing to drop everything at a moment's notice to run to Bethlehem—or wherever God shows up—and adore the one who is Love. To celebrate, amid the ruins of the things which had bound us, the new life which is possible. Remember what Gabriel told Mary when she questioned this hare-brained plan? "With God, all things are possible." Merry Christmas!

The Rev. Dana L. Campbell, Interim Rector