

For the past 25 years, I have arranged my maternal grandmother's manger scene as a visible means of preparing for Advent. A simple, monochromatic crèche with broken-nosed donkeys and slightly cracked sheep, it allows me to settle afresh into the Biblical story. No elaborate designs or rich decorations grace my plywood barn. And it doesn't matter. The story settles through my fingers and into my heart.

Every single year, I arrange the shepherds and wise men, angels and sheep, a little differently. One year, as I remember my liturgical and Lutheran grandmother, the wise men are placed far from the stable – a subtle nod to the reality that Christmas is not the same as Epiphany. Another year, I arrange each character in such a way that they are huddling around the manger, shoulder-to-shoulder, like a football team preparing their final, strategic moves. The cast of characters encircling the manger tries to reassure me that neither cold night air nor a wicked king could ultimately harm this beloved babe.

For as many years as I have had children, I have always hidden the baby Jesus, once the stable scene was arranged to my satisfaction. His cameo appearance occurred with great fanfare on Christmas Day, after having been discovered by my children among a drawer of candles or socks or scarves. I still recall 3 year old Amelia racing about our Americus home searching high and low for the missing baby. "Jesssssuuuus, Jesssssuuuus! Where are you Jesus?" Her little voice and large question still give me pause. It is a question which demands the very best of us.

In spite of past traditions, I cannot bear to hide baby Jesus this year. The past few years have been full of unique and difficult challenges: I know that I need to see Jesus easily – *clearly* -- as I arrange the manger. I cannot bear to have him hidden behind huddling onlookers nor tucked away among my scented scarves, so I place him proudly in the front of the stable, so there's no mistaking: *Jesus is here!* Mary looks a little stunned, as if she can't quite believe her good fortune. Joseph looks utterly confounded. The wise men, unperturbed as always, are a far distance from the stable, journeying past my weathered brass candlesticks. They remind me that there's much ground to travel in this journey of faith.

Of course, Jesus is *always* among us. Our rituals and memories, our songs and prayers do not beckon him to us. *He is already here.* Although Jesus often seems hidden among so much global violence and political division, he is not tucked into a bureaucrat's pocket nor silent in the wake of gunfire. Hardly. *He is already here*, beating us to the punch line of resurrection. Perhaps these difficult moments are opportunities for us to practice discernment, the art of discovering Holy in the midst of Hard.

Whatever 2019 may bring, whatever unexpected joy and untimely disaster may greet us, may we be blessed with seeing Jesus clearly. And when one of us cannot fathom his presence, may the rest of us have the courage to speak this abiding truth: Jesus is already among us, eager to lodge in the smallest of spaces, relentless in making all things new.

May this Christmas gift us with the ability to sense redemption in the unlikeliest of places.

May we see Jesus in each other's faces.

May we give thanks.

And may we change the world.

May it be so!

With great love and hope,

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