

## Playing With the Nativity

### **Mark 1:1-8**

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the prophet Isaiah, "See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way; the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight,'" John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey. He proclaimed, "The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit."

When I was growing up, our nativity set was really little. It was not given a place of prominence in our decorating. The 2" plastic pieces didn't even balance well on the rough wooden shelf where they sat. But whenever the living room was empty, my sisters and I would sneak in and play with them. We were sneaking, because we thought we weren't supposed to play with it. My Mom could never seem to figure out why the pieces were in such disarray, but she would complain as she put them back where they belonged. I don't think my Mom was really mad, and be honest, I don't remember what stories we told. I'm pretty sure we didn't re-enact the gospel story, since the pieces were never in the right places. But I wonder if they were ever anything like this.

[show Mr. Bean footage, ~3:30.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OoUIUOmKuq8&ob=av3e>]

Not the most Biblical nativity story ever. Then again, how Biblical is the nativity scene we picture? We tend to picture a perfect moment in time. Joseph gazes at Mary, and Mary gazes at her newborn son. All three are clean, without a single hair out of place. They are resting quietly in a stable, and though the cattle are lowing, baby Jesus doesn't cry at all. I have no proof, but I'm pretty sure our idealized nativity also doesn't include a single poopy diaper.

But these were real people struggling through a huge challenge. When Joseph learned Mary was pregnant, he could have had her killed by stoning. Legally. Mary is not surrounded by

the experienced women in her family, but is alone with a guy who presumably does not have a degree in obstetrics. Not only are they far from their home, they're far from any home. Stuck out back in the barn, with cows mooing and horses stomping. These are not comforting sounds (or smells).

No, the real Nativity was not perfect, but that makes sense. Because life is not perfect. We all know that bad things happen to good people. But God is still there. In fact, that's the whole point of the Nativity! God showed up. Even when Jesus' mother was an unwed teenager, teetering on the brink of disaster. Even when Joseph nearly cast her aside. Even when Jesus was born during a difficult and dangerous journey. Even when Mary had to give birth in a dirty, smelly barn. Even when the newborn's life was threatened, and the holy family had to escape to Africa. God shows up in the imperfect!

Later, just before Jesus begins his mission, it still wasn't perfect. Mark tells us this morning that the story of Christ begins with John – a guy who dressed in camel's hair and ate locusts. This was considered weird, antisocial behavior even then. This bizarre guy is the one God has chosen to prepare the way for Jesus. And certainly that preparation was more important than finding the right Christmas tree or having perfectly-frosted cookies.

Yet, every year, Americans spend huge amounts of energy and money trying to make our Christmas celebrations perfect. It's not enough anymore for us to prepare for Christmas. We have to prepare and prepare and prepare in order to make sure everything is just right. One year when I was home for Christmas break while my friends were still finishing at college, I had lots of time at home. So I helped my Mom do all the wrapping. That year, instead of just wrapping the gifts, I made sure everyone had one gift wrapped in red paper, one in green, and one in blue. Yup, I turned gift-wrapping into an exercise in perfectionism. It didn't make a difference, and

I'm pretty sure no one even noticed. Most of us have one or more areas where we do the same thing as we prepare for Christmas Day.

There's a difference between making necessary preparations and getting carried away. And if you don't know where that line is, may I suggest you go watch Chevy Chase in the movie *Christmas Vacation*. Everything has to be perfect. The lights. The meal. The gifts. The family relationships. The tree. The whole experience of finding the tree. It's exhausting! There are just too many variables to make even one thing perfect, much less everything. And the irony is that part of what made the first Christmas so special is that it wasn't perfect.

In fact, as far as God is concerned, perfection is not required for anything. We don't have to be perfect, because God's grace covers our imperfections. When we don't know how to pray, the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words. Jesus said, "My grace is sufficient for you." It is impossible for us to be perfect, but what is impossible for us is possible with God.

What would happen this Christmas if we gave up on perfect? If we said that sometimes, good enough really is good? Without the anxiety and stress that accompany perfectionism, we might be able to taste the peace that Christ brings into our hearts. We might be able to sit and enjoy what we have, instead of focusing on what we don't have. We might remember that just before he died, Jesus told the disciples, "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid." After all, as Paul reminds us in Romans, "the kingdom of God is not food and drink (or gifts, or Christmas trees, or light displays), but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit." Amen and amen.