

THE LIVING CRECHE

**A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
Christmas Eve Service
Stanford Memorial Church
December 24, 2005**

Every year during our 9 p.m. Christmas Eve service we have a blessing of our crèche up here on the chancel just under the pulpit. Creche is a French word meaning crib, and by the eighteenth century it was being used in English to refer to a representation of the infant Jesus, lying in his crib – a manger – surrounded by his parents and other human attendants as well as a number of animals.ⁱ The biblical basis for this is found in only one of the four gospel stories – Luke – as I’ve just read to you:ⁱⁱ

“Mary...gave birth to her firstborn son...and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn...Then...shepherds...found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.” That’s it for attendants to Jesus’ birth, except for unspecified animals that were presumably in the vicinity of the manger and some wise men that Matthew’s gospel notes also visited Mary and the infant Jesus, but at this time they were located in a house.ⁱⁱⁱ

The tradition of the crèche goes back to St. Francis, who first created this kind of Nativity scene at Assisi, Italy in 1223, as part of his efforts to bring spiritual knowledge to lay people. His was a “living crèche” with a real baby and live attendants, both human and animal. A huge crowd with torches in hand were said to have visited the hillside cave or grotto where Francis’ living crèche had been assembled.^{iv} Not only are crèches seemingly everywhere in modern America at Christmas time, there are also lots of living crèche displays all over the country now too – not only in country and suburban settings,

but right downtown in major cities as well – with farm animals mooing, braying and bleating and even an occasional spitting camel.^v

On this Christmas Eve, I'd like to recount a couple of stories of one of those urban settings – at Fourth and Race Streets in Philadelphia – where the Old First Reformed Church has been assembling a living crèche for more than thirty years. During the two weeks before Christmas, live animals wander around mannekins of humans in a makeshift stable. But on Christmas Eve church members dress up as Mary and Joseph, shepherds, and wise men. And there's always a real baby. After a reenactment outdoors using scripture and Christmas carols, everyone is invited indoors for a candlelight service. The church is located in the historic part of Philadelphia, near Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell, and it's old – with a congregation ongoing since 1747.^{vi}

One year the animals for the Christmas crèche arrived in the middle of a huge nor'easter rainstorm. The sheep and goats willingly walked out of the trailer into the storm, but the cow and donkey had to be coaxed. All of the animals found their way to the makeshift stable, where it was still dry. After the storm, people began calling up to find out when they'd be able to come see the animals: What are the opening and closing times? Do I have to make an appointment? How much does it cost? Many people were incredulous when told that the animals would simply be there twenty-four hours a day, with no time schedule, no fee to be paid, no waiting line. Just come on by, anytime! Then some callers got incensed and claimed animal abuse: "How dare you keep the animals out all night. It's too cold! Why don't you take them inside? They'll get sick." Obviously there are some city people so disconnected from nature that they don't understand that most farm animals have no trouble outside withstanding normal cold

winter weather. And it's hard to fathom that you can just come by and experience this living creche anytime, any day, or several times a day, no matter what the weather.

The minister of the church puts it theologically: That's the way it is with God. God is totally available, all the time, free, without any need for an appointment, signing up, or standing in line. We're often so busy, so distracted, so scheduled, including at Christmas time, that we can miss the small, daily epiphanies – the ways that God is present to us in simple, small, ordinary activities all the time.^{vii} Like moments of daily awe at the beauty that so often surrounds us, moments of thanksgiving in our lives, moments feeling the power of loving relationships, moments experiencing small acts of kindness (given and received). A Catholic priest who spent most of his life in India, Anthony de Mello, described a dialogue between novice and spiritual master this way:

Where shall I look for Enlightenment?
Here.
When will it happen?
It is happening right now.
Then why don't I experience it?
Because you do not look.
What should I look for?
Nothing. Just look.
At what?
Anything your eyes alight upon.
Must I look in a special kind of way?
No. The ordinary way will do.
But don't I always look the ordinary way?
No.
Whyever not?
Because to look you must be here. You're mostly somewhere else.^{viii}

One year the baby in the living crèche was named Tamika. Her parents – actually her foster parents – were coincidentally named Mary and Joseph. They'd been married in the Old First Reformed Church, where their parents were long-time members, and where they'd been involved in Sunday school and the youth group. Now Joseph was working as

a driver for a laundry-dry cleaning company and Mary was working at home, caring for six foster children. When the minister visited, in preparation for Christmas Eve, there were four infants and two toddlers. Mary explained that three of the foster children in her care were crack babies – addicted to drugs at birth because their mother was on drugs during their pregnancy. One had also been treated for syphilis at birth, another came at four months weighing only six pounds from failure to thrive, and the third came from a home with no heat, no beds, no blankets, no food. Jesus had much more going for him in the manger at his birth. The fourth baby, Tamika, had three siblings. The two younger ones had emotional disabilities and were living in foster homes. The oldest, at fifteen, had AIDS and had run away from every foster home where she'd been placed. she'd become homeless, living on the Philadelphia streets.

The minister was deeply touched by this special “holy” couple, who were directly connected to hurt and suffering in the world on a daily basis through the children they accept into their home. But, as Mary put it, “It’s a life we love. The language of children is easy to understand. It doesn’t take much to meet their needs. Some people, when they hear about us, think that our home must be a madhouse, but it’s really quite peaceful.” Mary and Joseph prepare most of their foster children either to be returned to their natural parents or to be put up for adoption. Over time Mary and Joseph, along with three children of their own, have helped raise more than a hundred children of all races and backgrounds.

So tiny, vulnerable Tamika came to play Jesus in the manger of the living crèche that year. She was threatened by death at an early age and faced an uncertain future, wrought with difficulties, just as Jesus did. Matthew’s gospel tells us that King Herod

was searching for the infant Jesus to kill him, and his parents had to flee to Egypt with him until after Herod himself had died.^{ix} In the parish of Old First Reformed Church, Mary and Joseph and Tamika announce that Christmas didn't just happen two thousand years ago. It's not just an ancient, romanticized story. Christmas can and should be about the here and now. The miracle of love continues to reach out in the warm welcome that can and should be provided for every new child as he or she comes into the world, every day.^x

St. Francis of Assisi urged Christians to "Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary, use words." The Old First Reformed Church is known not only for its living crèche, but also for its outreach to the poor and displaced of inner city Philadelphia. Among its programs, it provides a shelter for the homeless within its walls. As one newspaper reporter put it, "What makes your church's Christmas crèche really speak is that you make room inside your church building for the homeless." Preach the gospel at all times. If necessary use words.^{xi}

That's my Christmas message to you tonight. Live the Christmas story. Bring good news of great joy for all people. Praise God by personally helping to bring peace on earth. We each need to start by not being so busy and distracted and scheduled that we miss the small, daily epiphanies around us all the time – experiences of beauty, thanksgiving, kindness, and love. Then we need consciously to participate in saving and re-making the world, if not in the way of Mary and Joseph of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, then in our own personally effective ways. That's the process by which the Christmas crèche will truly begin to live for each of us, and for those we touch and affect. Remember that every time you look at a Christmas crèche, and then ask: "How is the

crèche living for me?” That’s how we can come truly to rejoice, with heart and soul and voice. Merry Christmas to each and every one of you.

NOTES

ⁱ *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), Vol. I (Supplement), p. 673; *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* (Springfield, Massachusetts: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 1997), p. 272.

ⁱⁱ Luke 2: 1-20.

ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 2: 1, 11.

^{iv} Geneva M. Butz, *Christmas in All Seasons* (Cleveland, Ohio: United Church Press, 1995), p. ix; See also:

http://www.everything2.com/index.pl?node_id=382188 and

http://grandpa_chuck.bravejournal.com/

^v A Google search yields 1,100 entries for “living crèche,” with displays from Maine to California and across the heartland from Texas to Minnesota.

^{vi} Butz, *Christmas*, pp. xi-xiii.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

^{viii} Anthony de Mello, “Presence,” from *One Minute Wisdom* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1985), p. 12, as cited in Butz, *Christmas*, pp. 17-18.

^{ix} Matthew 2: 1-23.

^x Butz, *Christmas*, pp. 33-36.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, p. ix.