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The Manger Re-arranger
Matthew 1:18-25

At my house growing up, we loved nativity scenes. My parents collect them, and each year we counted how many there were in the living room. More than 30 have been on display. And they are beautiful.

When my husband, JE, and I got married, we were gifted with a beautiful wooden nativity scene by my parents to set out for our very first Christmas together. During that first Christmas, we opened the boxes

and carefully placed these well-known characters in their place to set the scene. I love it so much. But soon I started to notice something. Every time I would come home, the scene was completely changed - telling a new story - like the time the wise men and Joseph thought that Jesus was a little lamb, ignoring Mary and the child of God on the side.



Or the time a sheep stood atop a camel to share the good news for all who would listen.



It didn't take long before new characters started appearing, like a wooden Santa with googly eyes carved by a beloved friend,

or the wooden penguin,



or the miniature yoda figurine as the wisest of men.



I live in a home with a manger re-arranger.

And then I visited my in-laws' house, and it all started to make sense. He got this trait from his father.

For sitting above the mantle – the place of honor among Christmas decorations – is a tiny train with each car holding the letters to the word “NOEL”. And JE’s father every single year takes the train cars and rearrange them from saying “NOEL” to “LEON”. It’s become such a tradition, they don’t even put it out to say “NOEL” anymore. It just always says “LEON”.

I think I have given up the dream of a traditional nativity scene and, I’ve grown an affection for my dear husband’s quirky behavior because, let’s be honest, the nativity scene is dynamic and moving. It is busy, messy and filled with drama. And it definitely did not happen the way our beautiful wooden sculptures portray, anyways.



The traditional nativity is actually a collection of stories and if we tamper with these decorations to tell the stories, a new vision of the scene emerges of GOD CONTINUING TO CRASH INTO OUR WORLD.

Manger Re-arranging...Joseph sleeps

For instance, let's look at this scene from our scripture today to a part of the story that I realize I often overlook, the story of a sleeping Joseph.



I think it is no coincidence that the Christmas story begins with someone sleeping - unaware that the world around him is about to change forever. Joseph actually sleeps a lot in this story. Matthew records Joseph having FOUR distinct dreams over the course of 28 verses. Almost every time he is mentioned, he is sleeping.¹ Later in Matthew, we hear a story of Jesus sleeping on a boat during a violent storm.² I wonder if Jesus got this trait from his father.

And when Joseph is awake, he is in a living nightmare. He had pledged to be married to Mary, when his

fiancé becomes pregnant... not by him.

He probably wasn't sleeping very well after hearing this news. He had no good choice ahead of him. If he continued with the marriage, he would be enveloped in an epic scandal while pleading innocence. If he publicly divorced her, she could be unfairly faced with the death penalty by stoning. He decided to quietly divorce her. It was the best way to protect his good name and save Mary's life.

When an angel appeared to Joseph in a dream, God called him to face his fear and do something different. To lay down his pride, his good name, and, along with Mary, sacrifice for a cause greater than he could even understand.

In Joseph's actions to accept this calling, he sets an example for his son, Jesus, that faithfulness is often a difficult road that not all will understand. This is a message Jesus must have remembered when journeying to the cross.

God came crashing into Joseph's world, and everything was rearranged. And the payoff was amazing. Joseph gets to be the adoptive father of Jesus!

Manger Re-arranging...the missing stable

And so as we change the scene, we follow Joseph and Mary traveling south to Bethlehem to visit Joseph's relatives after a census was announced. I wonder how Joseph's extended family responded after seeing Mary strolling into town, 9 months pregnant. What did they think of Mary? Would they even let her stay after the



¹ Matthew 1:20, 2:13, 2:19, 2:22

² Matthew 8:24

shame she brought to their family by having Joseph's child before their marriage was to be consummated?

If you are feeling like you have a complicated family,
That there is some family drama over the holidays,
That family dynamics aren't always as simple as you wish, you are in good company.
Jesus came crashing right into the midst of family drama.

Maybe this picture of the manger gives us permission to recognize that Jesus is already there in the midst of our imperfect families, sometimes even stirring up the conflict.

Now you may be tempted to think that the logical conclusion then is that Joseph's family rejected Mary (and Joseph's decision to stay with her and the baby) which is why they ended up in a field all alone. But, this is likely not the case.

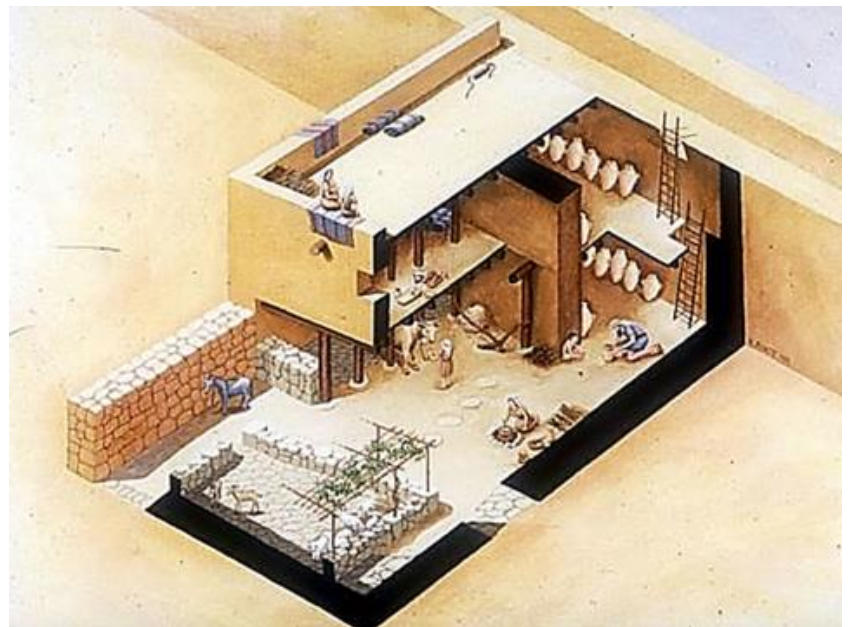
Jesus was probably not born in a bleak midwinter on a silent night.

Jesus was born in the middle of an overcrowded home amidst extended family, friends, and animals.

Our traditional stable comes from Luke 2:7. But if we look at the verse, it says that "Mary laid Jesus in a manger, because there was no place for them in the *inn*." No mention of a stable. And, while the role of the inn-keeper in the Christmas pageant is one of my favorites, he also doesn't actually show up anywhere in the Bible.

When we imagine traveling, we envision hotels or AirBNB's. But travelers in Jesus' place and time would stay in peoples' homes....especially when visiting family. This word for *inn* in the original Greek language of the Bible is the same word that is used for guest quarters.³ People in this culture have the kind of hospitality that takes everybody and anybody into their homes. Most houses would have a rooftop room especially for guests. This was typically a very tiny room. It is possible that Luke is saying there was no room to give birth, probably from all the extended family gathering for the census. Or maybe because the room was so small! So Mary and Joseph would have had to find another place to have that baby.

These houses generally contained a lower level where the animals would be brought in for the night. The lower level would have more space and contain a manger for the animals. This is likely where Mary had her baby - surrounded by family and animals in tight quarters. Still not the most comfortable scene for giving birth. But much more accessible.... this is a birth story where a baby is born into a house full of family. With all the family



³ <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-really-wasnt-born-in-a-stable/>

dynamics. It's loud. It's messy. This is not an isolated scene, but one full of people. (And maybe penguins and Santas and Yodas.)

When God came crashing in to the world of Joseph's family home, everything had to be rearranged. When God comes, it can often be uncomfortable, crowded, loud and overwhelming.

Maybe this is starting to sound like some of your Christmas gatherings with family. Boisterous with tension. Cracked and bruised with the wounds of complex histories. A stark reminder of losses of loved ones and those who could not make it this year. God came crashing into a home like that. It's in a place like this that Jesus arrives on the scene.

Maybe, this wild manger scene disrupts the pressure to have a perfect Christmas. Of chestnuts roasting and perfect presents and candlelight and hymn singing and laughter and wassailing (whatever THAT is!). Jesus has been known to show up there, too. But on the holiest of nights, God enters right into the mess of a chaotic world.

Manger Re-arranging....The Magi Caravan

And the scene is rearranged again, and we find Magi coming in from the East. These were likely religious and highly wealthy men. We have no idea how many there were, but we can assume that they travelled far and brought a whole caravan with them. They had likely learned of the stories and prophecies of the Jewish faith during the Babylonian exile nearly 600 years before. Some of them may have even been descendants of Jews who had been torn from their homes so long ago. They follow a star and uproot their lives for this journey to encounter a God who came to this world to encounter them.

I wonder what it was like for Joseph's family to host the magi caravan? Exchanging culture and food, stories and gifts like the best of international friends. I bet they retold the story of how the angel came to Mary and then how the angel came to Joseph in a dream and disrupted everything. I find it interesting that the magi actually take on some of the qualities of Joseph - sleeping and dreaming. They too have a dream where God shows up and rearranges their plans.⁴ The dream warns the magi that King Herod may bring them harm, and they will have to embark on a new route back home.

When God came crashing into their world, they could not return to life as it was before. Everything had to be rearranged.



⁴ Matthew 2:12, the magi are the only other character to have a dream in Matthew's birth story.

Christmas is disruptive. We have been waiting this Advent with a belief that God has come into this world and that God is wanting to come into our worlds. And when God comes, Joseph and Mary must risk their reputations and their lives, family and friends must open their spaces and hearts, and all who come into that place cannot go back the same way they came.

So when the disruption of Christmas comes to you,
When God sweeps into your world and brings noise to your silent night,
Embrace the disruption.

In the midst of this disruption we discover the story that God has been trying to tell... **God has not abandoned us. And will not abandon us.**

God is crashing in. As you prepare for Christmas this year, may you expect a calling to take risks, may you be uncomfortable and be ready for your lives to be forever changed. May you dream, even if your world right now seems like a nightmare. **Jesus is the great re-arranger.**

I think he learned this trait from his father.

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