

“A Little Dirt for Christmas.”

A Sermon.

Co-Missioners,

A formal liturgist calls it “The Nativity of our Lord.” The rest of us say “Christmas.” Either way, it’s just around the corner. With this in mind we bring you a sermon that Steve Albertin preached on a recent Christmas Eve at Christ Lutheran Church in a suburb of Indianapolis called Zionsville. Steve, a longtime member of our Crossings’ Board of Directors, served as pastor there for almost three decades, and to good effect, we trust. Steve’s ear for God’s Gospel is unerring. So is his ability to distinguish its ring from the constant clang of God’s law. You will catch the Gospel ringing here.

Steve is working in this sermon from the standard Gospel text for Christmas Eve, Luke 2:1-20. We’re going to follow this up on Christmas Day (or very soon thereafter) with a homily on John 1:1-14, crafted by our editor, Jerome Burce, for the older and sparser crowd that still checks in at church on Christmas morning.

“Glory to God in the highest,” sang the angels. “Peace and joy,” say we to all who read this. God grant these gifts to one and all, and through his trusting saints, to the world.

The Crossings Community

A Little Dirt for Christmas

A Christmas Eve Sermon

by the Rev. Dr. Steven Albertin



tmass tree in the midst of the brightly wrapped packages, the choo choo train winding through the picturesque winter village, and the glorious Christmas crèche with the Virgin Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the baby Jesus, there ought to be...**a pail of dirt.** And that dirt ought to be really dirty dirt, not like the sanitized stuff you buy at the local garden shop. No, that dirt ought to be the real grubby, crumbly, filthy dirt, the kind that lies around a construction site or in a dump. We need to place that pail of dirt out there in front of the tree where everyone can see it. Why? Because that pail of dirt, more than the bright lights, the bows, ribbons, the gaily wrapped gifts, and even the cute little manger scene, reminds us of what God is really up to at Christmas.

Yes, it does take the innocent and uncluttered vision of a little child to see once again what God did in that holy night in Bethlehem. That became abundantly clear to me many years ago when the nursery school children at my church went to visit a local farm on a cold damp day in December. The purpose of the

field trip was to have the children experience firsthand what it must have been like for Mary and Joseph to be turned away from a warm, clean room at the inn and have to spend a cold night in the barn. The children went up to the farmhouse, knocked on the door as if it was the inn in Bethlehem, and asked if they could come and spend the night. The woman who answered the door told them (of course, this all had been pre-arranged by the nursery school staff) that there was "no room in the inn." But there was room out back in the barn. So the children and the staff went around to the barn in the back trying not to get stuck in the muck of the barnyard. When they finally arrived at the barn, they got to see the animals.

The reaction of the children was most revealing. The children were quite disgusted with the whole thing. They had to be coaxed and persuaded to enter the barn. They just could not get over the filth and dirt inside. The animals were muddy and smelly, hardly the freshly scrubbed creatures we see standing around the manger in all the Christmas storybooks. And, of course, there was the manure, the stinking and slimy manure. And to think that Jesus was born into this! The children were shocked!

When the staff reported this incident to me, I too was shocked. Why? Because I too had overlooked the significance of the fact that Jesus was born in a barn and laid in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. Too young to have their vision skewed by years of Christmas glitter and glamour, these nursery school children were able to see the unvarnished truth of Christmas. They were able to see how dirty it really is.

It is precisely in the dirt that we discover what is so special and so amazing about the birth in Bethlehem. Dirt, manure and terrible smells, these are not things we usually associate with the presence of God. But Christmas announces to us that this is the kind of God we have. It is the dirt of Christmas that makes

our God so wonderful. We are shocked, amazed and dumbfounded that God would love us so much that God would be so humiliated as to come into a smelly and dirty world, to be born in the midst of manure and filthy animals.

But what do we do with Christmas? It is not simply the commercialization that takes the wonder out of Christmas.

Rather, it is all of our attempts to make Christmas holy again, to glorify it, to set it apart, to



make it something more befitting the glory and power of God. Nobody is supposed to cry at Christmas. Everybody is supposed to be happy and joyous. It is a time for peace and good will. There is no time for tears and pain. We work overtime, even frantically, to cover up and deny those very things that make us human beings and not rocks. Everyone must have the "Christmas spirit." That means pretending that everything is wonderful even when it is not. If we fail to pull it off, we complain about having "missed Christmas." The rest of the year may have its share of hurt and pain, but not at Christmas. Christmas must be "holy," "sacred," different from the rest of the year.

Even the Christmas story, the story of that dirty birth, is made holy. We build a fence around it and remove it from the ordinary, dirty world in which we all must live. Therefore, it

is a birth totally unlike any other birth in this world. There are no sounds of pain from a mother in childbirth. The stork must have delivered this baby. The donkey talks and perhaps some other animals too. A drummer boy appears on the scene. The shepherds are squeaky clean. The three magi, who were actually some sort of bizarre magicians or sorcerers, become three kings.

Then, of course, we have our Christmas trees with their shining lights, decorations, and ornaments standing there in all their isolated glory reminding us that this time is like no other time. On this night, there is no place for sorrow or pain. Grieving and weeping are not welcome. Everything must be neat and clean, shiny and new. Dirt is definitely out of place.

But if there is anything that St. Luke's account of the birth in Bethlehem ought to make clear, it is that Christmas is just the opposite of what our world and we want to make it. Christmas is about pain. A woman gave birth that night. Christmas is about God in the midst of dirt. That child was born in a barn not in the clean and pleasant confines of the local inn.

It is precisely in the debunking and dismantling of our Christmas mythology that we can begin to behold the true wonder and glory of Christmas. There is incredibly good news for us in this dirty Christmas. In this all too ordinary birth in Bethlehem we meet God, not in a terrible and frightening holiness that makes us sinners shake in our shoes but in God's loving and merciful holiness, a holiness that is truly unlike anything else in this world. Who of us would set aside our power and privilege and enter this world in midst of the dirt and stench of a barn?

But God did. And that is the good news! Why? Because when we find ourselves cold and dirty, when we find ourselves bogged down in the quagmire of a life that has never seemed to fulfill

our dreams, when our eyes are filled with tears of pain and disappointment because another year has past and the problems are still there, all we need do is to look to the dirty birth in Bethlehem. That child IS Emmanuel. "God IS with us" right smack dab in the midst of the dirt and the pain to assure us that there is nothing too dirty to separate us from His love. God is with us to love us. And in this child God has chosen to carry all of our sins and grief, all of our dirt and pain, all of our sorrow and tears, all the way to the cross where at last they will be destroyed, once and for all.

So, in the meantime, do not be afraid to have your Christmas be a little dirty. Do not be afraid to let your house get a little messy. And do not be afraid to cry. Do not feel you have to hide your hurt and pain. Do not think that you have to pretend that everything is perfect when you know it is not. That is not real life. Real life is dirty. However, because of that first dirty Christmas, there is still a reason to smile, to brush aside the tears, and sing a Christmas carol. For when we remember that the baby was born in a smelly, dirty barn in Bethlehem, we know that our God is not going to let real life and a little dirt get in the way of his loving us.

By the way, tonight when you sit under your Christmas tree in all of its glory, remember the dirt. You might even want to put a pail of dirt under your tree. We all need a little dirt for Christmas. It reminds us why we have so gloriously decorated that tree in the first place.

Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to use
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