

Like Never Before: The Nativity

Preached by

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United Church of Fayetteville

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Fourth Sunday of Advent

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Message: *Like Never Before: The Nativity*

Once upon a time, there was a family living through a pandemic, pretty much like any other family and, of course, unique in their own way. As the season of Advent went on, Jess, Brian, Lexi, and Shawn were learning more about what they believed and learning more about each other every day. Let's listen.

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They were in the living room, starting to unpack the nativity scene to put on the library table. It hadn't been out for a number of years. When Jess went back to work, she tried to simplify things at home. She was sorry to say that this was one thing that was simplified out of use for a while.

Each porcelain piece was wrapped in cotton batting and they were all arranged carefully on top of the wooden manger in a big box. They took out all the pieces and Brian put the manger in the center of the table. As they unwrapped each piece, they found themselves discussing whether they should arrange them all at once or save some and add them progressively as the story of that first Christmas unfolded. They all agreed Mary and Joseph and the cow should be out now.

Shawn yelped a little in surprise when he unwrapped a pet cat. Brian explained it wasn't a pet, but a barn cat that would have controlled mice that would eat the grain. Shawn thought they should have a dog too—but there wasn't one in the set. Brian went on to explain there was another story told about a dog that became quite famous. The story didn't have anything to do with Jesus, but it was called "The Dog in the Manger" about a dog that laid on the grain so the cow couldn't eat it, even though the dog himself didn't eat grain. Because it was a spiteful animal in the story, people usually didn't put dogs in their creche scenes.

They continued opening the figures and set aside the shepherds, sheep and three kings for later. They had a lengthy discussion about the angels. They even got out the Bible again; they didn't think the angels actually went to the manger; they went from heaven to the shepherds and back to heaven again. They decided they were going to find some way to have the angels sitting in clouds on the table.

The kids wondered what to do with the Scottish person.

"Scottish person?"

"Yes. The one with the bagpipe." Brian explained again: "that is probably a shepherd. Just like

Scotland, the Middle East had a lot of sheep and they made the bagpipes from parts of the sheep.”

When they had unpacked everything, the baby Jesus wound up at the bottom of the pile. It was the last piece to be unwrapped. Lexi said, “Whoa! What happened to the baby Jesus?!” He didn’t have the soft sheen of the other pieces and in some places almost all the color was worn off. And there was a big chip almost like a little bite taken out of his swaddling clothes.

Jess and Brian looked and laughed. Jess said, “You and Shawn happened to the baby Jesus.”

“What do you mean, ‘We happened to the baby Jesus?’”

“Well, we don’t know if it was because he was a baby or because he was small and smooth and fit into little hands, but the two of you were fascinated with him when you were young. He was out of the manger more than he was in it those years.

“Lexi, you kept giving the baby to someone you thought needed him. Once, your friend Michele was here and she tripped and fell when you were playing. She started to cry, so you gave her the baby Jesus. I eventually had to trade her for a Christmas cookie to get him back.

“And, do you remember Miss Myrtle?”

“My guinea pig?”

“Yes. One day, I found the baby Jesus in Miss Myrtle’s cage. You explained to me she wanted babies, so you gave her the baby Jesus.”

“She did want babies.”

“No, you wanted her to have babies, but the baby Jesus was the only one she ever had. “So, you were always sharing the baby Jesus.

“Shawn had a different approach. He like to have the baby Jesus with him all the time. He carried him around or put him in a pocket. That’s how he lost his shine. The baby Jesus went through the laundry cycle in one of his pockets. After that his color started to wear off as he got carried around and shared.

“Sometimes, Shawn would put the baby down for a while, on a sofa cushion or on a bookshelf. I thought maybe Shawn thought he was an elf on the shelf, but he told me, ‘No.’ Jesus was watching to be sure kids were okay, not trying to catch them doing something wrong.

“Anyway, between the two of you, your dad and I got pretty good at finding him. Until one year. It was time to put all the decorations away. We couldn’t find the baby Jesus anywhere, even though we looked everywhere we could think of. So, the set went away without him. Then, a week or so later, I was vacuuming. Somehow, he had been under the edge of the couch and the vacuum sucked him right up and that’s how he got the chunk taken out of his swaddling cloths. So that’s what happened to the baby Jesus. We could go on a search site and get a replacement.”

There was a long pause.

Shawn said, “I don’t think so. I think this is the baby Jesus we are supposed to have.”

Brian asked, “What do you mean?”

“Well, I think this is the baby Jesus to remind us...”

“Remind us of what?”

“That we aren’t supposed to put him away after Christmas.”

“That it’s good to keep him with us all the time,” Lexi chimed in.

“And remember that he is watching over us and not trying to catch us doing stuff wrong,” said Shawn.

“And that we are supposed to share him with people who need him,” Lexi finished.

And so it was that after they made space in the clouds for the herald angels, Jess, Brian, Lexi and Shawn found a place for the baby Jesus to stay, where they would see him every day and ever after.

Prayer for Others and Ourselves

Most compassionate God: We look to the days ahead with joyful anticipation, of celebrations different, yet rich with tradition. Of the scents of fir trees, the hot wax of candles, the twinkling of lights and the glow of fireplace. We will see smiles on screens and hear warm voices on the phone – limiting ourselves this year so that there is life, health, joy and companionship in the years ahead. We give you thanks for these things and for what is possible even in challenging circumstances. We ask for your spirit that reminds us of the holiness of everyday in this holiday season.

As we continue our own preparations, we see the places where your world has need of our work. Let us make ourselves signs of your coming in other lives, being a presence where loss is keenly felt, and being companions where loneliness holds sway. Grant us spirits of giving so that we might respond to the needs to those for whom joy is a more distant hope, for whom hunger will be resolved later rather than sooner, for whom shelter is a box or a space among strangers; for whom peace is a song or a prayer and not reality.

May we be so filled with the joy and new life your Son brings that it cannot help but burst forth from us into the world, so that, as partners in your purposes, we might one day see your peace, which is beyond human accomplishment and passes all understanding.

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day, our daily bread.

Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil,

for thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.