

I suppose we treat Christmas like an event encased in a exotic snow globe. You know those liquid-filled dioramas-in-a-jar that when shaken stir up with the magic of a gentle snow storm. I remember, as a child, I had one that depicted the Nativity. Of course, as a child, I would shake and shake, and the poor little baby Jesus, perpetually frozen in the center of my childhood snow globe, would be subject to blizzard after blizzard. I suppose snow globes are nice. Yet, we too often take what I imagine was anything but a serene moment for Mary & Joseph and figuratively submerge it in a liquid nostalgia. We take it off the shelf and occasionally stir it up and watch as the snow falls on the Holy Family, the shepherds, and the wise men. While I suppose, Snow globes bring some serenity into our hectic lives, knowing that if things get too rough we can stir up our Baby Jesus snow globe and watch as snow slowly drifts down in eddies and currents on our savior of the frozen diorama. But I don't think God's story can ever be so sanitary.

As much as we treat the Nativity this way, as much as we tell this remarkable tale as a children's story, Jesus was not born into a snow globe. No, he was born into the gritty and grim reality of a backwater part of the Roman Empire. Luke tells the story, cinematically by first backing us out to world view and focusing momentarily on Rome, for all intents and purposes the center of the universe, where Caesar Augustus was the emperor, and when the emperor says jump, everyone jumps. Apparently needing an accurate count for tax accounting purposes, he demands that there be a census. Luke then pans right and keeps panning right..past Greece...past Cyprus...past the more popularly known edges of the empire...till we focus in on some nearly unrecognizable and forgotten location. The camera then zooms in and keeps zooming and we think that it might fall on Jerusalem, but nope, it jogs north into the backwoods of the backwater, Nazareth, focusing in a pregnant unwed mother and her day laborer betrothed husband, forced to travel some distance, a long way for a late term pregnancy, from their Nazareth home to Bethlehem...because of something the emperor said. But it gets worse when, unable to find lodging, they are forced to spend the night in a barn. At which point this young mother goes into labor and births their son in this rough setting, laying him in a feeding trough as a crib, wrapping him not in the soft fine linen, but in reclaimed strips of cloth. Hardly a setting for a king, hardly the remarkable beginnings of a world changing events, hardly worthy of a snow globe diorama.

But then Luke, apparently not satisfied with how un-important this all seems, goes even further, he pans away from mother and child in the barn, taking us out of the town into the darkened and forgotten pasture lands where shepherds are grazing their flocks, far away from even the meager bustle of Bethlehem. It is here that Luke depicts the announcement of a new king. With all the flourish of a "Hear YE Hear YE" fit for the largest of cities, the angel announces to the unsuspecting farm workers that a new savior has been born. I imagine that these shepherds had never involved themselves in the politics of the region, and probably thought, when it came to kings and rulers not unlike the Jewish peasants depicted in *The Fiddler on the Roof*, "God bless and the keep the Czar far away from us." However, this king is born in a feeding trough and wrapped not in finest linens fit for a king, but bands of cloth, a birth probably not unlike their own, a birth fit for a farm worker. They probably thought, this I've got to see. To know that God comes to them in the reality of their world, must have made all the difference.

No, I don't think this story was intended for snow globe depiction. I think if the shepherds or Mary or Joseph could see our nativities and the way we depict Christm they would tell us, it's not rough enough, it doesn't smell enough, the people aren't anguished enough. Christmas doesn't come into an antiseptic sterilized and perfect world, but in the reality and grittiness of our lives. Christmas is not about the perfect present that will make someone happy, but about the imperfect presence to another that will

make them know they are cared for, loved, cherished. This is what God does for us and what we, living out the incarnation, the birth of god into the grim reality of our world, can do again and again in our lives. We are living Christmas stories.

A while back, Sarah and I took gifts to a couple of families living in less than ideal conditions. As we navigated the pot-holed drive of the trailer park, made our way up the dilapidated stairs, avoiding the missing planks of the front stoop, I thought, "This is where Christ comes." Not to our fancy tree lit homes, not to our holiday perfections, not even to our demands to keep the Christ in Christmas, but to the forgotten, backwater, reality of our world. And this is good news for all of us, because that means that God comes to the messiness and humanness of each of our lives. God doesn't avoid us because we are not perfect or not doing all the right things or not saying all the right words. No, we don't need to be a perfect palace, a barn and a feeding trough will do. No, we don't need to be our best selves, God worked through an un-wed mother. No, our lives don't have to be snow globe frozen perfection, but can be the noisy, broken, and gritty reality of everyday life. And that is the Good news announced by Angels to shepherds about a baby born to **them** that day in a small town in a forgotten part of the world.