

## **Christmas Reflection**

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Sophia Lyon Fahs wrote that each night a child is born is a holy night.

This night will be no different. This night there will be children born all around the world. Some will be born in sterile hospital rooms, others birthed at home by the gentle hands of midwives, but some, as was the case with Mary's baby, will be born in less ideal conditions.

Some will be born while their parents are fleeing violence, in unfamiliar, possibly even dangerous places.

Some of these babies who are born in these desperate circumstances will even be born in Israel, the land of Jesus' birth.

How much and how little has changed.

But the story of Jesus' birth was never the romanticized version that we see portrayed in Nativity scenes each December.

Etched in porcelain or wood, or even plastic, what we see today is a perfectly calm baby, no scrunched up face or tears in sight. Peaceful parents with beatific smiles. Motionless animals, silent worshipers gathered around. Perhaps an angel hovering overhead, but not with the terrifying visage that made the shepherds quake in fear at the sight of them, no, we see cherubic angels with white robes and feathered wings.

No sound, no movement. No remnants of the undoubtedly painful and messy birth which just took place. It is easy looking at these motionless scenes to imagine the lyrics of Silent Night come to life.

All is still, all is bright.

But that's not the reality of birth, or barns for that matter. As someone who has brought two lives into this world I can tell with some authority that nothing about birth is still or silent.

Even after the baby has been born there is lingering discomfort and disarray.

In barns even at night animals shift and emit low sounds.

Not to mention the audacity of strangers showing up and expecting to barge right in on your special moment. Bearing gifts, but still. I doubt that they contributed to any silence or stillness that was happening.

Because what we see in Nativity scenes has never been the reality of this story.

This has always been the story of a poor, desperate family bringing life into the world in spite of the challenges and hardships that they faced.

Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes tells us that:

“The story of the Nativity of Christ is not just a lovely, starlit moment of precious magic and calm adoration. It's the story of God's subversion of the world, through no power at all except love.

Read the stories (one in Matthew, one in Luke) without romanticizing and you see a story of God's vulnerable presence amidst poverty, oppression and danger.

The manger is not a cute image.

It's about a family that is homeless, at risk, and coping. The magi work knowingly around political and military repression.

The family escapes death squads and becomes refugees.

And where is God in all this? In a baby.

This is the story of God's incursion into our power structures, to transform them from the inside out with nothing but radical presence and compassion.

God does not act as a king or a warrior, but comes as a vulnerable, powerless child, who makes rough shepherds tender, who draws kings to worship on their knees, who threatens Herod and reorganizes society.

God does not impose laws for us to follow: God gives us love to fall into.”

God gives us love to fall into.

And love is what draws us back to this story again and again.

Even before Jesus began his ministry and preached his radical messages of love that threatened the power of emperors and generals, his birth itself was a subversion.

His lowly beginnings challenged the very understanding of what a king was. This was not a child who was born in a palace, but one born in a stable, the only shelter that his parents could find, offered to them by the kindness of strangers.

And while the magi did eventually follow the star to find them, it was the shepherds to whom the angels appeared. The shepherds who were deemed some of the lowest members of society, being described as “detestable”. The shepherds were right down there at the bottom of the social hierarchy along with those of the Jewish faith.

Because remember that at this time Israel was occupied by the Roman empire and those of the Jewish faith were suffering under an oppressive rule, only barely tolerated.

In this story God chose to send his angels to the shepherds, once again subverting expectations and bypassing the social order.

And after reading and rereading this particular story this year I kept coming back to the juxtaposition of the chaos that was happening and the serenity of the nativity scene.

And then I realized that hidden within this simple and familiar story is a parable of peace.

And that maybe this is why the nativity scene that we create now, that draws us in, chooses to show us this frozen, and perhaps unrealistic, moment of peace. This moment was maybe just a breath, just a heart beat before the baby started crying, before the donkeys started braying or more unannounced visitors showed up.

It shows us a peace that upends the rules of society, shepherds lifted up, kings brought low, mysterious beings from heaven singing out joy.

This story offers to us the moment where the parents are finally able to stop and marvel at that which they have created.

The shepherds could have run in fear from the angels but they didn't, not only did they seek out the child, but then they spread the word of his coming far and wide.

And the magi who came, they could have gone back to Herod, as they were ordered to do, to tell him of the baby's location, but they didn't. Instead they were brought to their knees in awe of what this child offered.

In the midst of this trial and tribulation, for just a moment all of the players come together, without conflict, to lay themselves down before this tiny infant. An infant who symbolizes what all children symbolize, your children, my children, the children who are being born right now.

Which is hope.

Each night a child is born is a holy night.

For children offer us hope. Hope for the future that was promised with the birth of a child born long ago under a shining star that still has yet to arrive.

Jesus went on to become a wise and beloved leader whose teachings gift us again and again the wisdom that radical all-encompassing love is what will set us free.

And by “set us free”, I mean help us to create a world in which mothers don’t have to continue to birth their babies in squalid and unsanitary conditions. And that after those babies are born they aren’t forced to flee to foreign lands, or send their children away, so that they have a chance to live.

This story has always been about peace. Peace, the very idea of which is the definition of subversive, because conflict is how tyrants stay in power, it is how they divide us, how they keep us from bringing down the systems of oppression.

That is what the Christmas story offers us each year, and why we return to it time and time again. Because hope is powerful. Hope is life. And hope for peace, for a real and lasting peace, that is the miracle that this story both gives to us, and begs us to create.

Each night a child is born is a holy night. And this night is no different.