

December 19, 2015 Florida Hospital Seventh-day Adventist Church
John 14:1-3 and John 1 Away in a Manger by Andy McDonald

When I read through this drama weeks ago a piece of it stuck in my mind. Way in the back of my mind ever since has been the human need for us to clean up the Christmas story. This week I've looked at lots of art depicting the night of Jesus birth in that Bethlehem barn and not once, not even once could you hardly imagine even, the smell of a real barn.

We've sort of sanitized it. I think it was the line about Mary's appearance in the art...that she came out of labor looking like she just had six hours in a health spa, and I might add looked like Tide and Clorox had just whitened the shawl covering her head.

I did find one picture. A still taken from the movie the Nativity where Joseph is bending on one knee in front of Mary who is holding the newborn, and is sort of dis-shuffled, hair a little sweaty, just a touch of reality, looking like she might just have delivered a baby.

The familiar Christmas carol, Away in a Manger sort of presents us with more coveted or wished for scene than stark reality. When this carol first appeared in 1887 in a little book of songs entitled, Dainty Songs for Little Lads and Lasses, there was a note below the song that said "Luther's Cradle Hymn (Composed by Martin Luther for his children and still sung by German mothers to their little ones.)"

I grew up with the mental image of the great reformer with a guitar of some sort singing this lullaby to his children in their wee little beds. But that isn't likely the case either. No connection with Luther. Certainly much connection with Pennsylvania Germans where the song likely originated. The reality is that no history or mention of the song supposedly by Luther, can be found until it shows up 400 years after his day in Philadelphia.

Regardless of authorship the little Lord Jesus is pictured asleep on the hay. But our tendency to focus on the baby's divinity to the exclusion of his humanity is pegged in the words of the second verse.

"The cattle are lowing, the baby awakes, but little Lord Jesus, no crying He makes."

Really? No! Not really. Last week we recognized that this baby is Immanuel, God with us. But we must not make him so divine as to cover over the realness of his humanity too.

And wa-la, here in lies the great mystery of Christmas. We know the story. Most of us have heard it and told it and memorized verses about it.

A young teenage girl is visited by Gabriel an angel sent from God, who tells Mary to not be frightened that God has decided to bless you. You are going to have a baby and you are to name him Jesus. He will be very great and will be called the Son of the Most High. God will give him the throne of David and he will reign over Israel forever, his kingdom will never end. Mary finds this an interesting concept in the abstract but from her perspective there's a problem. She asked, "How can this be? I'm a virgin!"

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you," the angel said, "and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the baby born to you will be holy, and he will be called the Son of God. "

The whole story is complicated from the start. Then you throw in her old age aunt Elizabeth who is already in her six month of pregnancy.

Joseph, when he realizes Mary's pregnant, isn't so sure about this whole angel visit thing. He's disappointed and hurt and confused until the angel visits him and confirms the story.

Of course the angel doesn't take the time to visit all of Mary's family and friends and Joseph's relatives so there are whispers and rumors of scandal.

The story is complex, nearly unbelievable—suspicious pregnancy, Mary's visit to Elizabeth who's baby jumps for joy at the sound of Mary's voice. The couple's journey to Bethlehem to pay taxes.

In many a Christmas play we've made a big deal about the Innkeeper. But the actual story has no reference to knocking at the door of the inn, or going inn to inn with no luck and finally an innkeeper who offers the barn. All the official story says is that when the baby was born his mother wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the village inn.”

Of course in the pictures all is pretty clean, no signs of manure to be cleaned out, or really anything dirty. All the animals are groomed for the photographic moment. Joseph and Mary and the baby are clean and even pristinely so. And when the shepherds make it into the picture they look unusually well kept for having just been laying in the fields keeping watch over their flocks.

Many cards feature the wise men who've been on the road for like months, but when they show up in the scene, as we often portray it, there's no question they've found somewhere to clean up and change. And of course they are there, pictured in the stable, but scripture says in Matthew 2:11 when they arrive where the star leads them, they “Entered the house where the child and his mother Mary were...” So they were never really in the barn at all!

But we like to make the story about a sweet special baby. We want to know his birth weight and how long was he? What were those strips of cloth. And then we like to imagine him asleep on the hay. And even when lowing cattle wake him he is this super baby who doesn't even cry when big scary cows moo him awake.

Don't get me wrong Jesus is both ordinary and spectacular, common and one of a kind beyond that reality for each human, and this is part of the mystery of the story of Christmas.

Maybe we sweeten the story to make out like we get it. "Yeah, there was a baby born in a barn. We get it!" But listen to these words from an article about this scene:

"In contemplating the incarnation of Christ in humanity, we stand baffled before an unfathomable mystery, that the human mind cannot comprehend." Maybe that's why we dress it up a bit. We attempt to frame the story so we might fool ourselves into thinking we understand it! The article goes on: "The more we reflect upon it, the more amazing does it appear. How wide is the contrast between the divinity of Christ and the helpless infant in Bethlehem's manger! How can we span the distance between the mighty God and a helpless child? And yet the Creator of worlds, He in whom was the fullness of the Godhead bodily, was manifest in the helpless babe in the manger. Far higher than any of the angels, equal with the Father in dignity and glory, and yet wearing the garb of humanity! Divinity and humanity were mysteriously combined, and man and God became one. It is in this union that we find the hope of our fallen race. Looking upon Christ in humanity, we look upon God, and see in Him the brightness of His glory, the express image of his person." Signs of Times July 30, 1896, quoted in SDA Bible Commentary, vol 7-A p. 444

Jesus, that baby in the manger, wasn't just like other children, just like you and me. Sure he was in the sense that he was human but he was human and more, he was God in human flesh and blood.

Listen to the amazing Christmas story, Jesus, one with the Father and Spirit in eternal glory; the one to whom the angels sang Glory, Glory, Glory to him as God Almighty, made himself NOTHING. He took the place as slave, became human, lived among us, humbled himself to the place of crucifixion, died, was buried but rose again and is now been given a name that is above every other name.

Jesus this baby asleep on the hay is 100% God and 100% human. There were dirty diapers, and spit up, and the whole process of learning and developing. Luke 2:52 tells us he grew in both wisdom and stature. Mystery unfathomable that the one who made everything there is, the one who understands the complexity of everything that exists in the universe, would need to learn, to process through those stages of development.

I wonder what it must have been like at some point in his boyhood when it dawned on him the complexity of who he is?

We come to Christmas and from the nativity scenes in front of churches to Christmas cards that come in our mail we can be caught up in the season mixed with Santa Clause and reindeer trees and decorations and the mixture of tradition and pretend and reality may influence us to clean up the story, or tempt us to cast it as fable. It isn't. This story isn't about Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer. We aren't dealing with Frosty the Snowman.

We can't have this a good story about a really really nice man named Jesus who was born in a barn and who grew up and did a lot of really nice stuff but who isn't God.

There is no convenient place for him to be good and not God. As apologists have correctly noted he is either a liar and lunatic or he is Lord God almighty. There's no middle ground.

It was during the feast of Tabernacles that the Jewish people would commemorate and celebrate the fact that God had guided their ancestors out of Egypt and through their wilderness wanderings by a pillar of cloud during the day and a pillar of fire in the dark dessert night. That light in the darkness had been this great visible evidence that God was constantly with them.

So during the Feast of Tabernacles they had this ceremony called the Illumination of the Temple. It was held in the Court of the Women. Great galleries were erected around the court to hold the spectators. The sun would set and darkness would come over the temple. The anticipation would build as the darkness settled in and then the four great candelabra that stood in the center of the court at a dramatic moment would be set ablaze as a memorial to the light God had been to his people during their Exodus. And the people would sing and dance in this light as they adored their God.

It was in this context that Jesus announced to the people, "I am the light of the world. If you follow me you won't be stumbling through the darkness, because you will have the light that leads to life."

Jesus couldn't have made a more astonishing claim. The word light was directly synonymous with God himself. The Psalmist wrote, "The Lord is my light and my salvation." Isaiah said "The Lord will be your everlasting light." Here Jesus is declaring himself to be Messiah.

In the discussion that follows this declaration Jesus eventually in John 8:58, says to the Jewish leaders, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was born, I am!" This was to name himself as God. You may remember Moses at the burning bush where God reveals himself as "I am." Later in John 10:30 Jesus says it even more plainly, "The Father and I are one."

This is either true and Jesus is God incarnate, God with us, the light of the world and one with the Father, or he is a lying lunatic.

Jesus leaves no room for middle ground, he didn't intend to.

Jesus came not to be just like me and just like you, he came as the second Adam. He began where the first Adam began. And this time he passed over the ground where Adam fell and redeemed Adam's failure.

Romans 5:18-19 Tell us of the journey of Christ. “Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous.”

We may sometimes try to have just a sweet little baby who becomes a good man (not really a possibility with his claims)
Or we have the incarnate God, creator of all there is, who humbles himself and becomes a man among humanity for our reconciliation with God.

This baby asleep on the hay is the great I AM the one in whom there is life original, unborrowed, underived. And when we agree and respond with
My Lord and my God then, as Lloyd Ogilvie says, “The rest of his ‘I am’ statements flash like diamonds of truth.

He says to you “I am” have no fear. Into our times of darkness, blindness and need for direction he says to us, “I am the light of the world.” To our hearts that are hungry for love, acceptance, friendship, physical food, and emotional filling he says ‘I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will not hunger.” Into our self-destructive patterns he comes with divinely inspired self-compassion saying I am the good shepherd. Into our life of worries and uncertainty he shows up and says, “I am the way the truth and the life. When we are hurting in the loss or facing our own mortality he shares hope, “I am the resurrection and the life. And in our tiredness and sense of impotence he reminds us of where our strength comes “I am the true vine, abide in me.”

The last verse of our carol for today invites, “Be near me Lord Jesus I ask thee to stay close by me forever and love me I pray.”

Jesus is near to us and we have a choice, not just to ask him to be near to us but that we make the choices to position ourselves to be near to him.

Finally the last line of the song: Bless all the dear children in thy tender care, and take us to heaven to live with thee there.

He's not just a baby asleep on the hay. He is the God of the universe who is coming back. And before he went back to heaven he gave some really good advice. In our world filled with all kinds of violence, and meanness and bad thinking he said this.

“Don't be troubled. You trust God, now trust in me. There are many rooms in my Father's home, and I am going to prepare a place for you. If this were not so I would tell you plainly. When everything is ready, I will come and get you, so that you will always be with me where I am.”

That baby asleep on the hay in our song is going to show up again. This time not as a baby but as Lord of Lords, and King of Kings and like the song says, to take us to heaven to live with him there.

TAKE away →

What are some of the ways you can think of that we have “cleaned up” the Christmas story?

How do you do with thinking about all the real baby functions and thinking about Jesus being like that?

What do you think is the appeal of having a baby Jesus, who “no crying he makes”?

What is hardest to believe about a 100% man and 100% God being who Jesus is?

Why can't Jesus just be a “good” “moral” teacher?

What do you think about Jesus claim to be “I am” and one with the Father?

How can the “I am” statements of Jesus encourage you?

How is Jesus our example and how is he our substitute and which do you value most?

John 14:1-3 are meant to comfort us, how do you feel about Jesus return?

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