

December 24, 2018 – Christmas Eve  
Pastor Erin Bouman, Irving Park Lutheran Church  
Luke 2:1-20

### **A Real Baby**

This year our Sunday School Christmas Play had a real baby playing the part of Jesus. This church has a tradition of a large production, an original play, that the children do on a Sunday in mid-December, a production that features many and various scenes, Biblical ones and contemporary ones, too, but always also the manger scene, the one we heard about in tonight's gospel reading, the scene of the very first Christmas. This year, in our Sunday School Christmas Play, for the baby Jesus, we didn't pull a doll out of the lectern, instead, we had a real baby.

The baby, who, at six months old currently owns the title of youngest member, was actually a last minute addition. The play's director and author, a member here, thought of it late the night before. She mentioned it to me the morning of the play and then I proposed it to the baby's parents when they arrived early for worship. (Exciting things can happen when you arrive early for worship!) I asked the parents if they would be up for it, if their infant would be up for it, if during the last scene of the Sunday School Christmas Play, the manger scene, if at that point in the production Mom could sort of sneak in from the side, and then hand her son to the student who was playing the part of Mary. We assured the parents that though young, Mary was completely capable. (Just like the original Mary). The baby's mom could remain up front by her child, sort of hovering nearby as part of the scenery, there would lots going on up front at that point because for this closing scene all the actors would be up there, the whole cast, there at the manger: characters from Biblical times, and from today, and from the beginning of time. Yes, this particular Christmas Play included a creation scene. Because, preschoolers in animal costumes. And then why not have them take the stage twice: once at creation, once at the manger. The discerning eye might have noticed that one of the animals had a strong resemblance to Snoopy...All manner of characters were up there for the closing manger scene, a great and odd collection, and then, when cued, the crowd would part, for a "manger reveal," so that everyone in the congregation would then be able see what was there, behind it all: there at the manger with Mary and Joseph, a real baby.

The baby's mom and dad were game to give it a go. The play began, the initial scenes hummed along, all the students did great, and then there was the final scene, the "manger reveal"—and the baby stole the show. Everyone was telling me about it afterwards, what a good job the baby did. Unrehearsed, too! But still, really nailing the part he'd been asked to play: placidly reclining in a stranger's lap, occasionally looking up and around, taking in this surprising choice for his new caretakers, turning his head now and then to see all these others around him, the angelic children, the animalistic children... If that's not a spot on portrayal of baby Jesus I don't know what is. At one point the baby even smiled. Everyone was talking about it afterwards, how touched they were to see this real baby, right there in the middle of the wild assortment, an assortment prone to wandering, and losing focus, and there he was: awake, alert, at peace with everything going on, somehow even blessing it.

That's what Christmas is: a real baby, in the middle of the chaos and confusion, a real baby who is the Son of God, come to us, in the midst of humanity, in the the mess of humanity, in a humble stable, in our humble stagings, God revealed, real.

If you are looking for something real, Christmas is for you. I you, like me, are tired, so tired, of counterfeit claims, of all the fakery and hypocrisy, of disingenuous and duplicitous people, if you are weary of that, the scene at the manger is for you. If you know that there are falsehoods that you tell yourself, including lies of which you are not even aware, if you know that we deceive even ourselves, the Christ child was born for you. If you are longing for a place where people can be real, where you can be real, where you can discover and become who you really are and were created to be, this place is for you: this stable, and the crowd that gathers at it, and the manger we make with our hands, when we come forward for the sacrament of holy communion, and what we receive in that manger, and in our very selves, the real presence of God, it is here, for you.

That Sunday of the Christmas Play, though I shared in the hope and expectation of the real baby's arrival, when the scene happened, I couldn't actually see the real baby. I was standing way over there by that side door, so as to have access to the light switches, I was in charge of the play's special effects, I was to flip the switches when God said, "Let there be light!" and then when the Bethlehem sky was filled with a multitude of the host. I only missed one of my cues... and I missed seeing the real baby, because of where I was, because of my angle of perception.

There are ways that Christmas is like that, not just for me that day, for all of us, these days. It can be hard to see the real baby, sometimes. Two thousand years after the birth of Christ, we are at a different angle.

I couldn't see the real baby in the Christmas play, but I could see reactions to it. I could see the baby's father sitting in the pews, I could see him smiling from ear to ear as he watched the scene unfold. Even from a distance I could see that the Father's shoulders were shaking, going up and down, his whole chest sort of twitching, he found so much joy in what he was seeing he had to swallow his laughter. I think that's Christmas: God the Father, smiling from ear to ear at the sight of his son, here among us. At Christmas God is so filled with joy at what is unfolding, heaven and earth shake with mirth. We can look for those reactions, the joy of the Father, all around us, in the earth, in our neighbors, in the miracle that is every child.

I could not see the real baby, but I could see how the children on stage reacted to it, at the "manger reveal". As I mentioned, they were all supposed to part at this point in the play, sort of like the Red Sea, a Biblical scene which somehow did not make it into this year's play. The children sort of moved to the sides, a little. But then, even though they had been prepped ahead of time that we hoped to have a real baby, when we did the play, for real, it was as if when he did appear, they collectively became aware that something wonderful had happened. There was a real baby, right there on Mary's lap! And so then they all leaned in together, to admire it, "Ooh, look! A real baby." One of the teachers helpfully also joined the scene and gave the children a couple gentle nudges, did some repositionings. The "manger reveal" had to be revealed again, opened up yet wider. I think that's Christmas, too, and church, too: that reminder that this wonder we witness is not just for us to huddle around, it is meant to be shared. This is joy for the world! We are to open up to others, for others, ever wider, and again and again.

I could not see the real baby, but after the play people were telling me about other years when there had also been a real baby, when that real baby had been their child, and how meaningful that was, how much it meant then, just like how much it meant this year. That's Christmas, and that's our role now: to see the joy of the Father, and to share it ever wider; and to love and serve, to act as Jesus.