

Picture Perfect

As some of you may know, my dad grew up in Miami, Florida, the only son of two people whose families moved south from New Jersey and South Carolina when things bottomed out during the Depression. My grandmother had particular ideas about how things should look, or at least about how she assumed others expected her to make things look, especially at Christmas. One year, she dressed my dad and his two sisters in wool Christmas outfits and placed them in front of their fireplace for the perfect Christmas photo, complete with a roaring fire. My dad remembers very little about that Christmas except how miserably hot he was in those clothes in front of that fire. I know that my grandmother was doing her best to make everything appear just fine, even though their family struggled behind the scenes. She longed for a certain kind of life for my dad and my aunts, and so she did her best to create the appearance of that life. She wanted everything to be picture-perfect.

She's not alone. We hear the story from the gospel of Luke every year—about the angels and the shepherds and the family and the tiny child swaddled and sleeping—no crying he makes. Picture perfect, down to the little town of Bethlehem with its silent stars and its peaceful sleep. Except that's not the story Luke shares. As scholar Justo González points out:

This is not a mellow, bucolic story about some shepherds tending their sheep with little or no care beyond a wandering wolf...The setting is rather that of people living under an oppressive regime.¹

¹ Justo L. González, *Luke, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible*, eds. Amy Plantinga Pauw and William C. Placher (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2010), 33.

The names Augustus and Quirinius are not merely biblical tongue twisters for the scripture reader on Christmas Eve. They are a signal from Luke that Joseph and Mary are not in charge and that Rome is, at least in human terms. And Rome insists on a census—not simply to keep track of which city is the region’s fastest growing but because the empire needs to know what resources are available. Empire is expensive. Oppression costs money and requires soldiers. The Bethlehem of Jesus’ birth was not picture perfect by any means. Nor is that little town picture-perfect tonight. As Casey mentioned in his sermon this morning, the churches in Bethlehem opted to cancel the annual tree lighting and parade this year, not wanting to gloss over the devastation and suffering in Israel and Gaza. They didn’t want to pretend that things are picture-perfect. Some have said that Christmas in Bethlehem has been cancelled. The expected trappings and tourist-centered traditions have been called off this year, but Christmas has not been cancelled. In many ways Christmas without the trappings, without the festivities may well be Christmas in its purest form, reminding us what the birth of Christ means in its truest sense.

I love receiving Christmas cards. I have now lived in six different places in my adult life, and I have loved people in all of them. I am so grateful to hear from them, to know what their children and grandchildren and dogs are up to, who is going to school or to work and where, how they are enjoying retirement, where life’s adventures are taking them next. Whether the cards are simple photos from CVS, custom works of art, or somewhere in between, it is easy to convince myself that the life behind the card is as elegant and blemish-free as the card is. It is easy to convince myself that others’ lives are picture perfect and that mine should be as well. And if my life is not picture-perfect, then I have somehow dropped the ball and flunked Christmas. But no amount of festive coordinated outfits or elegant calligraphy or gold envelope

liners can hide—let alone erase—the job loss or the diagnosis or the grief or the financial struggles or the weariness or the addiction or the broken relationships. No one's life is picture perfect. No one's. We may not know the truth behind one another's Christmas cards, but God does.

God knows all too well how our lives and the world we inhabit fall short of what God hopes and intends. **And** it is into such lives and into such a world that God chooses to be born. No matter how much we have prettied it up over the centuries, God doesn't even choose a picture-perfect script or idealized setting to birth God's own son into the world. As beautiful as Luke's story is, the writer makes it clear that the world into which this child comes is one fraught with oppression and injustice, pain and suffering. And in case we forget, a truly picture-perfect world has no need for a savior. The world into which Christ is born does. So Luke tells us about a weary young mother bound to a fiancé who is not the father of her child. This mother gives birth to her child far away from home because of the whims of a greedy emperor. And the arrival of this child does not magically resolve everything. Christ's birth does not flip a switch and make everything picture perfect, not in the way we might dream or imagine anyway. The religious elite do not willingly abandon their cozy relationship with power. Rome does not suddenly agree to loosen its grip on things. Hearts still break. Relationships do, too. And death still comes for one and all.

I was recently reminded of a poem entitled "First Coming" written by Madeleine L'Engle:

[Christ] did not wait till the world was ready,
till [humans] and nations were at peace.

He came when the Heavens were unsteady,
and prisoners cried out for release.

He did not wait for the perfect time.

He came when the need was deep and great.

He dined with sinners in all their grime,
turned water into wine.

He did not wait till hearts were pure.

In joy he came to a tarnished world of sin and doubt.

To a world like ours, of anguished shame
he came, and his Light would not go out.

He came to a world which did not mesh,
to heal its tangles, shield its scorn.

In the mystery of the Word made Flesh
the Maker of the stars was born.

We cannot wait till the world is sane
to raise our songs with joyful voice,
for to share our grief, to touch our pain,
He came with Love: Rejoice! Rejoice!²

The great good news of Christmas is that God does not wait for the world to be picture-perfect. Instead, the Lord of All, the King of the Universe chooses life with here us. God's own tiny child makes a home here with us in the thick of all this and declares with his very life that

² Madeleine L'Engle, "First Coming," *The Ordering of Love: The New and Collected Poems of Madeleine L'Engle*

neither violence, nor heartbreak, nor injustice, nor death has the final say. And in Jesus, God gives birth to the church, the community of faith, the Body of Christ who dares to proclaim the One who does have the final say. This One, this child of Mary, is born not in a picture-perfect palace but in a spare room. He will go on to rankle those in power and to be scorned by his neighbors. He will insist on hanging out with fishermen and tax collectors, hugging children, and healing lepers. And he will ride into a fortified and occupied Jerusalem on the back of a donkey. There he will be tortured and executed for all the ways he dares to question the status quo and dares to point out that God's way is and always has been one of peace, love, justice, and mercy. Even then, God does not wash his hands of us or declare that we have blown it beyond all hope. No, instead God raises Christ up on the third day and gives birth to the church. And God then dares to entrust this very human, less-than-picture-perfect band of people with sharing the good news of God's love made known in Christ, the perfect love that does not end and cannot be stopped, no matter how not-picture-perfect we and this world may be.

Rejoice! Rejoice!

Thanks be to God. Amen.