

April 29, 2018 Modest Beginnings

I realize that we are not approaching Christmas, and after the winter we have finally just started to come out of, I am reluctant to talk about this but let's think about Christmas cards for a moment.

Christmas letters have almost come in and out of style, e cards are quite popular among the computer literati, postal rates have climbed so high that some people have stopped sending cards, so I am not sure what is going on with Christmas greetings any more.

When we do receive Christmas cards, many of us have various ways of displaying them. How many of you either come from a home where this was done, or do it still.....thumb tacks and string, cards straddling the string across the top of walls?

Some people have more sophisticated display holders that hold a number of cards, in an attractive arrangement.

Some people pile them anywhere they can find a horizontal surface in their home!

I really enjoy Christmas cards.....one that sticks out in my mind is a hand painted watercolour card....a few suggestions of trees, a couple of deer, lots of snow.....another one is a photo of 2 young children, snow suits, a huge spruce tree laden with snow, and a snow man of sorts being assembled. I always look forward to a card from a special friend.....it is a creative photo of either her dog in the snow, or a cardinal at her feeder.....Since I love the Nativity scene so much, I am partial to cards that have beautiful depictions of the nativity.....the wisemen kneeling at the manger in their stunning silk robes, the young, rosy cheeked shepherd boy, kneeling with his lovely sheep, Mary and Joseph, enamoured with the babe in the manger, and that special warm glow emanating from that manger into our hearts. Christmas cards can be very very beautiful and very very special....look at these examples (Slide #1)

That's the Christmas I know. That's the nativity that I know. That's the Jesus I know!

But the funny thing iswhen I pick up that book.....what is the name of it again...oh yes....the Bible.... when I read about Christmas there, it is a very different story than what I get from the lovely cards that I send or receive. The Bible's interpretation of Christmas is full of disruption, and fear, grit and danger, and an acute absence of hospitality! I can never find Christmas cards like that!

In the Bible, we have a pregnant teenage girl, terrified by her predicament and nearly unhinged by some spooky angel who speaks directly to her. And the news the angel brought, was anything but comforting. This news would not have been well received by a closely knit group

of religious Jews. But this unhappy news, and time spent in a stable is how His story begins. We know only too well how His story ended.

I have yet to receive a Christmas card that tells me any of this! Instead, I get little verses that rhyme, horses dashing through the snow, a cute photo of my friend's dog, or a highly polished manger scene.

That's the Jesus I know and who's birth I celebrate.

Let's consider the circumstances of Mary and Joseph for a moment.

Shame and disapproval, Mary wanted to hide the unhideable truth. Joseph was ashamed but he wanted to do the honourable thing. The pregnancy was unplanned and mostly kept in secret. The labour and the delivery was not in some fancy delivery suite or even a doctor's home office. It was in a dirty stable.

Who did Mary and Joseph have to turn to through all of this? We know Elizabeth supported her cousin Mary from afar....but we don't know much more than that....other than a busy and mostly unhelpful innkeeper, some unknown astrologers from the East, a few confused and star struck shepherds. There is no mention of grandparents, or aunts and uncles. No baby shower. No special knitting done. No cradle or bassinette for the baby....instead a crude manger. We are so keen to forsake the reality of this scene and paint it in festive Christmas greetings.

What do we learn about Jesus from the first Christmas....the version from the Bible, not our Christmas cards?

When I think of that first Christmas, here are some words that come to mind –

Simple Humble Modest Poor

There are so many more words that could fit on this list.

But what really strikes me is this....That God chose to be born in that place, at that time, to those people, in those circumstances. God is God! God could have been born in a palace, to rich people with servants by the dozens. The baby could have been wrapped in the finest silk, and placed in a place of most extraordinary comfort and luxury. Instead.....swaddling cloths, and lying in a manger.

If Jesus came to reveal God to us, then what does the Christmas story tell us about God? And what does any of this tell us about God's call to you and to me?

I love those shiny Christmas cards and those fancy envelopes lined in luxurious material. I delight in those cards that come with a spectacularly artistic cover. And as for cards that depict

the nativity, the fancier, the better. But they block my view. They fog up my thinking and my sensitivity as to what Christmas is about, what Jesus is about and what God is about.

It is so easy, and we are so tempted to restrict Jesus to the image of handsome man with sheep on shoulders or children on his lap - beautiful baby lying on fresh fragrant straw, immersed in a warm golden glow of light while cows and donkeys and camels breath their warm and gentle breath upon him. That is the Jesus I know.

Who is Jesus for you? What was He like? What were His joys and what were His struggles? How lovely was His life and how difficult was it?

It is so easy to glamorize and sanitize Jesus' life. But its not helpful. The invitation is for you and me, to dig deeper and to grow in your knowledge and understanding of the Jesus we never knew...that we may know him now.

Amen