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Christmas 2020

Dear People of God,

In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen. As we prepare to celebrate the wonderful festival of the birth of our Lord. I wanted to come before you and provide you with some something to share if you will. It feels a little awkward to be here in the chapel here at the Diocesan Close with no one here doing this, but hopefully it can be something that you can benefit from.

So a few years ago, I was in Minnesota, I was a rector of a church there, and near our house was this mega called the Mall of America, and one of the things Minnesotans like to do, when it is very cold outside, is to drive up to the Mall of America, leave their coat and jacket in the car and dash into the mall, then spend an hour or two walking around the Mall and just enjoying being in a space that feels like it's summertime in the middle of all that snow, and ice, and cold. Well, one day I was there in the mall, all I was doing was walking around, I had a little bit money burning a hole in my pocket that I really wanted to spend, but I didn't know what I wanted. And I walked around the mall, and I walked around the mall, it hit me at one point, that there was almost nothing in this entire mall that I particularly wanted to get.

Then, there was this small shop that had all sorts of decorative items in it, a little bit of this, a little bit of that, a little silver, a little gold, a little crystal, whatever. So, I went into the store and I was looking around and I saw this little guy. He amazed me. There was something about his face that I couldn't get out of my mind, and I looked at him, and he wasn't that much money, so I decided to go ahead and get the figure. Not knowing who the artist was, not know that this was one of the three kings, because his name isn't on it. Later on, I bought the others and I noticed that Calspar and Balthazar's names are on theirs, but Melchior's has no name on his. I got it and I took it home and have enjoyed it, and that entire creche, ever since.

I was surprised by the face, drawn in by this human figure, this human face. Recently, I have been thinking a lot about the birth of Jesus, particularly the stories that are in Luke's gospel. I remember Luke 2 verse 7, "And Mary gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, for there was no place for them in the inn." Now I've wondered about that, because I have been in Israel, I've seen some of the places where they think Mary may have given birth, and what that manger may have looked like, what that scene was. I've also read recently some scholarly articles arguing about what that manger really was, or wasn't, in fact some folks think that instead of a manger it was simply a lower room in a house of someone who would've been family to Mary and Joseph, and it would be where they brought the animals in to protect them from winter. So, it was a guest room, maybe in the home of a friend.



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One of the articles was talking about how we needed to make sure we didn't think of Jesus as having been born in a situation where he was by himself, alone. The funny thing is I never thought of Jesus of having been born alone. He had his parents with him. And not only that, but from these stories there may have had others, there may have been a mid-wife. There may have been family members around to watch over him and care for him, and from our story there may have been others like the shepherds or the wise men. I thought the story more of Jesus being born in a simple place to simple parents: to be born, if you will, poor, or common.

That to me is the surprise of Christmas: that God comes in the form of Jesus, in a way nobody expected. The shepherds didn't really know what to expect, the wise men didn't, Mary and Joseph didn't, and no one else did not even Herod or anyone else around. That God would come as a small child has always, not only surprised me, but has delighted me and it has helped me to understand that is the way I see God most often in my life. That God comes in surprising ways, in surprising times, in surprising situations, in surprising people. God comes when I least expect God to be around, and that God comes to me as love. The love that we share in family and friends and in Christian community, that's the way God is most often, I think, experienced by us humans.

We now live in a time which is unlike any other time, we now live in a time when there is so much fear and worry and anxiety around COVID and all the other things going on in our life, it is so easy to be overwhelmed. It is so easy to forget that God is still God. That God is still in the world. That God is still surprising us with God's presence, all the time. Sometimes it is hard to find God. Sometimes we are in situations that just overwhelm us, that we can't even understand ourselves, much less understand what is happening to those around us, or what's happening in our life. And yet, God is present. God is seeking us out. God is surprising us in ways that will delight us, one way or another. Again, I just really still come back to this little figure, this little face. This incredibly, marvelously crafted face of a human being.

You are made wonderfully well. God crafted you. God knit you. God created you. God sustains you. God loves you, and God will be with you. My prayer for you this Christmas is that you will find God surprising you and delighting you, and that God's presence will be with you now and always. God bless you; God keep you, in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Merry Christmas,

+Michael Hanley
Episcopal Bishop of Oregon