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The Nativity Scene

Besides the Christmas tree I do not know of another tradition that symbolizes Christmas more than the nativity scene. I am sure most of us grew up with a nativity set decorating our home and I am quite certain that many of you have a nativity set decorating your home right now. And then of course there is the tradition of the live nativity scene that is often portrayed by children at the annual Christmas program. Kings from the east, shepherds from the nearby fields, angels from heaven above, and an assortment of farm critters gather around Mary and Joseph to get a peek at the newborn child, Jesus. Even though the gathering is not Biblically accurate, the nativity is a beautiful scene and one that I adore as much now as when I was a child.

History tells us that the first nativity scene took place in Greccio, Italy in 1223. St. Francis of Assisi received permission from the pope to take an ox and a donkey inside of a cave and there he delivered a message on the birth of Jesus. Tradition has critters such as sheep, cattle, and donkeys at the manger scene, but in truth the Bible does not mention anything about animals being present. Luke's gospel tells us about the angels singing and telling the shepherds what has happened. In Matthew's gospel we are told of the wealthy visitors from the east that have followed the star to Bethlehem. Surprisingly, the gospel's Mark and John do not mention anything about the birth of Jesus and some Biblical scholars believe the birth story in Luke was a later addition. Were the shepherds and the wisemen all standing around together at the stable in Bethlehem? Probably not, but the larger story is what to me has great meaning. Just take a look at all who came to worship the newborn king. We have the common every day blue collar worker represented by the shepherds. The kings from the east were probably astrologers but they represented the well-educated and those with financial resources. The farm animals display the diversity of creation that are present to honor the baby Jesus. And even heaven is called to participate in this amazing event when the angels fill the sky and sing, "Glory to God in the Highest and peace to all people on earth!"

Well, it is time for me to set up my nativity scene as I have not yet got around to doing so. My nativity set was given to me by a friend that visited Haiti on a mission trip and purchased a nativity set that was handmade by a resident of Haiti. One of the interesting things with this nativity set is that Mary and Jesus are black while Joseph is white. Every one of the nativity sets I saw growing up portrayed Mary, Joseph, and the baby Jesus as white. In truth all three would have had olive colored skin just like the middle-eastern people have today, but to me the color of the skin is not important. I believe that God does not notice the color of our skin, but only the tenderness of our heart. One of the challenges I had with my nativity set is that there are more people than you typically have in a nativity set. There was one particular figure that I was not sure where it fit in. I didn't think it was a shepherd and I was quite sure it was not one of the kings. At a recent children's message, I was explaining my dilemma to the children and I asked them what we should name this figure. I was thinking along the lines of king, shepherd, innkeeper, etc., but I was not ready for the answer, "Bob". One of the young girls thought that we should call this figure, Bob. So from now on when you think about those gathered around the manger to get a peek at the baby Jesus, don't forget about Bob.

God's Love, Pastor Bill