

“How do you ever *find* anything in this mess?” That was one of my mother’s persistent--but loving--questions to me. Because as a kid, my room was always messy. I thought clothes looked better stored on chairs than in the closet and books were better organized in piles than on shelves. My mother would open my door to retrieve something from “The Vortex,” as she called it, and she’d sigh, “*How do you find anything in this mess?*”

“*How do you find anything in the mess?*” Even if you are not a messy person yourself, you know one. Your spouse is messy, or your co-worker’s desk is a “disaster zone” or your children or grandchildren just can’t ever seem to keep things or themselves clean. Even if you’re a neat-freak, you’re at least familiar with mess. Because mess--the disorder of things that we want to be orderly, mixed-up muddles instead of predictable flow, confusion rather than clarity--mess is a part of human life.

If my mother’s words to me were, “How do you ever *find* anything in this mess?” then God’s parental words to the shepherds on that first Christmas can be rendered, “Go, for it’s time to find something in the mess.” The angel of the Lord stands before them and says, “This will be a sign for you: you will *find* a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” Through the angel, God tells the shepherds that they’ll find the Messiah in the mess that is currently the city of David: Bethlehem, which at this time is *teeming* with people, overcrowded with extra guests and all the mess that crowds bring with them.

God asks the shepherds to go, walk through the city--bumping up against the people, sidestepping the trash and litter, smelling the *aroma* of the extra travelers, additional animals, and all the food cooking to feed them all.

God tells the shepherds to go into the messy, overcrowded city and seek out a manger--the messiest room of a house; the stable, where the animals live, along with all the filth and dirt that having livestock penned up semi-indoors entails.

And after entering the overcrowded city, looking in the muckiest spots, you will find, God promises, a child: a human in the messiest stage of life, for we all know that mess loves babies and babies love mess.

Yes, perhaps the Shepherds wondered the same questions as my mother: *“How will we find anything in this mess?” How will we find the messiest little person in the messiest part of the house in the mess that is Bethlehem?*

But they will. For the shepherds, you see, are finders and seekers among the mess. Their daily work is keeping track of messy little creatures; their nights are full of seeking out and finding what is lost or hard-to-find.

These seekers--who live somewhat messy, nomadic lives themselves--know how to locate isolated things. God knows the shepherds are just the people to find the tiny messiah in the great big mess.

Because that is the message of Christmas: The Messiah comes in the mess. The Savior of the world is born in a stable. Mary births the Lord of Life amidst the litter. The Deity wears diapers. Yes, messiness is where

God's power does its first work; "You shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger," God says. It's a promise that we will find God amidst the utter mess of life.

Our lives are messy, after all. Perhaps they're full of physical mess--disarray from the new little ones or clutter from thirty years of accumulated living. Perhaps we find ourselves in the midst of a spiritual mess this year--it's been a year with deaths, divorce, addiction, job loss, job worries, retirement woes, money problems. Whatever mess we have with us tonight, it is into that and despite that that Christ is, nonetheless, born.

Christ is born despite and into our messy national life. Christ is born despite and into our divided congress, pernicious prejudice, systems and sign-ups that are increasingly hard to navigate. And Christ is born into our global messes as well. Christ is born to a world where refugees wander, missiles fly, and diplomatic ties wear thin.

Yes, if God promises the shepherds that they'll find the Messiah in a sticky kid inside a grubby stable within the hubbub of Bethlehem, then God certainly promises us that we'll find the Prince of Peace in the stress of our lives inside any chaotic land within the confusion of our time.

So, like the shepherds, we need not fear. We need not run away nor avoid the mess. We need not think, "Well, life is a mess" as if we or our lives are failures and off-track, as if messiness is an excuse for God finding us or our seeking God.

“How do we find anything in this mess?” We believe that Jesus Christ, the Son of God, the Savior of the World, is born into it. And like the shepherds, we go into the mess seeking the child. For we will find that the Messiah is in the mess. Emmanuel, God-with-Us is there.

AMEN.

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December 24, 2017  
Nativity of Our Lord (1)  
Isaiah 9:2-7  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20