

- I'm going to come right out and say it.
- This Christmas... is different... and like most of you I am having a hard time with it.
- I have family scattered all over the metro area that we have to be hesitant to see.
- Many families made sacrifices in their choices about how to spend Christmas.
- It's throwing me all off...
- Well it was, until I took some time to sit with this sermon... and it gave me some perspective in what I discovered.
- Sometimes it is terrifying and disorienting to realize you got something wrong about God or theology or scripture.
- And then other times, it's pure joy.
- I got to thinking about the idea of how there is “no place like home for the holidays”.
- And that led me to think about how Mary and Joseph traveled home to Bethlehem for the census.
- Which then brought me to think about the nativity scene that sits on the mantle in many homes this time of year.
- As I did more research, I discovered a blog called “field Notes”, written by Author Sarah Bessey.

- In a specific post- Sarah talks about “why everything You know about the Nativity is probably wrong”
- She writes: *“If more mothers were pastors or preachers, perhaps the beautiful creche scenes of Christmas wouldn't be quite so immaculate. We wouldn't sing songs of babies who don't cry. And maybe we wouldn't mistake quiet for peace. As it is, we take on a properly antiseptic and churchy view of birth, arranged as high art to convey the seriousness and sacredness of the incarnation. It is as though the truth of birth is too secular for Emmanuel. Birth doesn't look like our concept of "holy" in its real state. So we think the first days of the God-with-us require the dignity afforded by our careful editing.”**
- This can be tough to hear, but she makes a great point.
- Do we want to keep the Nativity clean and easy to approach?
- Or do we have the time to slow down this year and SEE the story?
- It turns out the Story is bigger and wilder and more generous.
- It turns out these are tidings of great joy, this is peace and good will for us all.
- **The real Christmas story right there in the scriptures is actually beautiful.**
- It's perhaps not represented in our carols or our Willow Tree Nativity sets but it's the story I want to remember and the story I want to tell because truth matters.

- We sometimes miss it because we can impose our traditions and our way of being onto Jesus' life instead of reading the story in context and placed within his culture.
- **Sarah in her blog informs us: "For starters, Jesus wasn't born in a barn.**
- Middle Eastern homes of that time did not have the stable for the animals separate from the home at all.
- Instead, the home was usually made of two rooms: one for the family and the animals and another one at the back or on the roof for the guests.
- Joseph wasn't turned away from a hotel; he was told that the guest room was already taken.
- Even there the text has even been misinterpreted itself - it's not that there was no room at "the inn" as we understand a bed and breakfast or a hotel but rather the word is "a place to stay" meaning a guest room as part of an actual home.
- **So the story is actually one of hospitality - the home where Mary and Joseph stayed was not a guest room but *an actual family room.***
- They were welcomed into the family's quarters. They weren't even in the guest room but in the main room of the home."
- Also, **Mary and Joseph were not alone**, they were part of a caravan.
- And they were not travelling alone to Bethlehem as strangers. This was their family ancestral home.

- They were likely part of a traveling community of family members all headed to a place ready to welcome them for the census.
- It would have been unheard for them to be alone on the road, let alone be utterly friendless in Bethlehem.
- Joseph and Mary probably would have been welcomed immediately into almost every single home in the town given their lineage, let alone the standards of hospitality at the time.
- They were well known, well respected, and likely well loved.
- And Finally, we hear about Mary's **loneliness and isolation at the time of birth.**
- Birth is a thin place. It's always so much- so much pain, so much waiting, so much joy or sorrow, so much love, and far too messy with too little control.
- But, based on what we know now, *Mary was absolutely not alone at the moment of birth.*
- **She was almost certainly and absolutely attended by skilled and present women, likely even community midwives.**
- In fact, she probably had *too many* helpers given the circumstances.
- Mary wasn't alone. She was in a warm home, surrounded by women who had walked the road ahead of her, who were able to care for her.
- Jesus had a similar story. **He came into the world, not isolated and alone and apart, but fully embedded within a family and a culture.**

- Jesus was warm, Mary was supported, and they welcomed the shepherds there to that place, as a family.
- The Christmas story isn't one of loneliness and quiet isolation in the darkness.
- **This is a story of welcome and hospitality, of lamplight and family, of birth in all its incredible sacred humanness, entrenched in a culture and in a time and within a family.**
- And even about something as small as this - as small as a wee babe - is an opportunity to reorient ourselves to Jesus and to the steady ground of his abundant life. **The incarnation is the miracle: it's not Jesus' otherness but his us-ness, his human-ness, his full experience as fully human and fully God together that is the miracle.**
- He wasn't separate and unique and different from the story of birth; he was welcomed and warm within a story already being lived, just like any kid.
- So may this Christmas feel like home- maybe different than what was expected... but just as we learned more about what the “real nativity scene” looked like, we too can find peace, comfort, hope, and joy in the birth of this baby.
- Amen

