

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
“Do You Hear What I Hear: Hoping in God”  
Rev. Joanne Blair  
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Luke 2:1-20

A couple of weeks ago, I was chatting with a friend of mine from Poland, and asked her the “probably most asked question” at this time of year ... “Are you ready for Christmas?” She happened to grow up under Communist rule, and we have the most interesting conversations! Anyway, her reply to my question got me thinking.

She answered that while she hadn’t totally finished her shopping, her house had been scrubbed top to bottom ... windows, blinds and walls washed, carpets shampooed, furniture vacuumed and polished ... and so on. Naturally I assumed she was having lots of company, and I shared with her that a lot of people these days do “surface-cleaning” before the guests come, and do the “deep-cleaning” after they leave. She replied that she wasn’t having company this year ... that she was going to her sister’s house. The reason for the deep-cleaning is a long-embedded tradition to make sure your home is clean to welcome the Baby Jesus. This really struck a chord with me, and I’ve been pondering it ever since.

It got me to thinking: Is my home clean to welcome Jesus? Now I know for sure that my house isn’t ... but what about my home? My inner dwelling? If we were only talking about physical surroundings, then I guess none of us have anything to worry about. After all, let’s really think about the birth narrative for a minute. It was not a pretty picture! And though we are not here this morning to celebrate Jesus’ birth (come back tonight at 5, 8, or 11:00!), we all know the story. But so often as our emotions get ahold of us, we “pretty-up” the story and too seldom do we really consider the harsh realities of the situation.

The stable had to have had quite an odor, (let’s be honest, it would have stunk!), and I can’t imagine the bands of cloth used to wrap the baby were very clean, and ... Jesus was placed in a feed trough... which would have been covered with animal spittle and leftover feed.

It’s important to pay attention to this story because what is so spectacular about it ... is that it is so ordinary. We often have a tendency to think that living modest, unassuming lives in small unknown places insulates a person from the extraordinary. Well, Luke’s story certainly discredits that theory! Mary ... an ordinary, unknown woman from an unknown place was chosen by God for a singularly distinctive role that would reorder her entire life ... and that of the whole world.

Mary accepted God’s call on her life, but surely, she must have felt overwhelmed, unprepared, and perhaps unworthy. Surely, she must have questioned (or at the very least not fully known) the struggle she was to endure. But God chose her, and she “opened the doors of her home” and welcomed God into it.

In the book of Luke, after Jesus is born, the first ones to see the baby Jesus were the shepherds living in the fields. The creches we lovingly set out each year display a tender scene of those gathered around the

baby Jesus, and there is always a shepherd or two with some sheep huddled near to the manger. They're beautiful, and creche's are something many of us cherish. But the reality of the scene that night was anything but beautiful! Most shepherds were boys among the ages of 8-14, with two or three grown men to supervise them. These ordinary boys and men were held in low esteem and not considered to be a part of "polite society." In fact, they were considered tainted.

Walking around in sheep dung, smelling of wet and dirty animals, it was impossible for them to ever be considered clean ... hence, they were never allowed to enter synagogues or the Temple. And to a Jew at that time, religious life revolved around the Temple. Shepherds were deemed unclean, both physically and ritually. For certain, shepherds would not be considered trustworthy messengers of news as great as the birth of the Savior of the world. Yet it was to them that the angels appeared. These dirty, smelly, "nobodies" (mostly not much younger than Mary) were who the angels summoned to go see the Christ-child and tell of his birth. And they said yes. They were called, and they responded to that call. Just as Mary did. They "opened their doors", and trusted in God.

And what about us? Do we trust God? Do we respond to God's call? For while we may not have an angel appear to give us a message, God does call each and every one of us. It is only through Scripture that we know of Mary and Joseph and the shepherds centuries later ... they were just ordinary people ... chosen for extraordinary things. And to be honest, we are all ordinary. Few, if any, of us will be remembered in the centuries to come. In fact, few of us will ever be known outside of our work and personal life circles.

But that doesn't mean that we ordinary people are not called by God. And it doesn't mean that we are not called to great things. We, ordinary people, are called to receive and live out the love of God ... and there is no greater thing we can be called to than that.

Today's scripture tells us that we do not know ahead when or how God will call us ... but God does call... each of us. Some of us are called to be loud and public. Many of us are called to live quiet lives of faithfulness. But we are all called. And it is up to us to say yes. Think you're ordinary? Well, "God has big plans for you" ... living as a disciple of Jesus Christ, and making God's love manifest in the world. And no matter how clean our personal home may be, we can all "open our doors" and invite God in. And if we keep our doors open, God will help with the cleaning and show us where we are called.

But like Mary and the shepherds, it is up to us to welcome God in, and say "yes."

So, when tonight comes and we celebrate the birth of Jesus, look closely at your creche. If God used these unlikely, ordinary people ... then won't God use us too? And let us ask ourselves... "Though my home may not be clean, are my doors open to welcome God in, and hear God's call? And am I saying "yes" to that call?"