

Luke 2: 1-20  
Creekside COB  
December 24, 2005  
*Christmas Eve Service*

## The Mystery and Manure of Christmas

They call it, “reality television.” We get to gaze upon the private lives of real people in real-life situations as they deal with real-life issues. Even if we don’t care about these real people, we’re supposed to be interested enough to be entertained. I’ve seen just enough “reality” TV to know that it bears no resemblance to my reality or that of anyone I know. As far as I’m concerned, their reality is messed up, and hardly entertaining.

Queen’s song, *Bohemian Rhapsody*, begins with questions-- “*Is this the real life? Is this just fantasy?*” On Christmas Eve, when so many expect so much, and after it is over feel so disappointed, reality is a must. Tonight we recall the reason we are glad we’re Christians. Tonight, many are looking for reasons to become Christians. On this night, of all nights, we look reality in the eye, or better yet, it looks into ours.

I cannot tell you exactly happened the night Jesus was born. No one can. But I can tell you what it’s about, and it isn’t tinsel trees with toys underneath; it isn’t Bing’s “*White Christmas*” or Frank Capra’s, “*It’s a Wonderful Life*”; it isn’t the Christmas gift exchange, egg nog, folks dressed up like Eskimos, or Jack Frost nipping at your toes.

Before you start throwing things, I don’t want you to think I’m out to ruin your Christmas. I’m fond of these traditions, too. But they have nothing to do with Christmas.

I can’t stand reality TV, but Hallmark should create a Reality Christmas Card Series. In the typical nativity, Mary and Joseph kneel at the manger. Both have halos. Jesus has one, too. Mary is a model of serenity, wearing a lovely blue dress. Joseph’s hair

and beard are manicured. Jesus is nestled in the clean, sweet hay.

Around the holy family are humble, well-mannered shepherds, wise men wearing robes from Liberace's wardrobe, and barnyard animals looking like they've been groomed for the 4-H Fair. The scene is stylized, sanitized, romanticized, and deodorized and far from reality.

Every year we bemoan the corrosive effect of materialism on Christmas. But the problem isn't that Christmas is too materialistic—it isn't materialistic enough! I was present at the birth of my two children and a granddaughter. Their mothers did not look *radiant*. Childbirth is a mysterious, miraculous event, but it's not pretty. It's exhausting, painful, bloody, and messy. A cattle stall doesn't smell like a bed of roses. The shepherds smelled like the flocks they watched by night. Hallmark should market a scratch-and-sniff Christmas card so we can take a whiff of what it was like when Christ was born.

*Christmas recalls the mystery of the incarnation.* God became a human being. God's son came into the world slippery and screaming like everyone else. He went through the phases of human development—teething, toilet training, the terrible two's.

The incarnation was scandalous in the early years of Christianity. The first believers were attracted to the idea that God had come to us, but the incarnation was going too far! They believed the physical world was corrupt. Every aspect of the human body was inferior and offensive and profane.

How could the eternal Word become flesh? How could humanity and divinity live in the same house? Some tried to clean up the incarnation by teaching that Jesus only "*appeared*" human. A second century a teacher named Valentinus tried to solve the problem by saying that Jesus ate and drank like a human baby, *but he did not dirty his diapers!* The Son of God wouldn't do *that!*

**If you're the squeamish type who avoids the untidy, messy, painful aspects of life, the incarnation won't mean much to you. Jesus' birth was untidy and messy. What if God opted to remain aloof and above the fray, what could you take with you into this cold, December night?**

**If all we can scrape together is a little nostalgia and holiday cheer, it will freeze in the frigid air, slip from your grasp, and splinter into little pieces on the ground. If Jesus isn't with us in this tattered, battered world, there is no power to appeal to, and no one to whom we can go.**

**But I have a good word in my mouth. We don't have to settle for so little. God isn't locked up in heaven. God doesn't hide behind church doors. At Bethlehem, the Word invaded the world. The spiritual invaded the material and the two can't be separated. God came down and looked us in the eye.**

**So, what does it mean? At the very least it means if you are lonely, God is with you. If you are anxious and depressed for some reason, or no reason at all, God is with you. If you've been given the diagnosis, "*There's nothing we can do,*" God is with you. If your spouse says, "I don't want to be married anymore," God is with you. If everything you've worked for evaporates, God is with you. If you've had all you can take, and want to scream, "Life is a stinking joke!" go ahead. Life stinks for all of us sometimes, but God remains with us. This is what we celebrate tonight.**

**An author has said:**

**I refuse to be limited by the traditional boundaries of Christian thought.**

**We must go beyond to a spiritually sound and deeply faithful way of Jesus who came in:**

***Simple surroundings***  
***Noisy cattle***  
***Flickering starlight***

***A stench of humanity***

**And out of this came a way of healing both the spiritual divisions and the brokenness of our earth.**

**“Behold, the virgin Mary will conceive and bear a son, and his name shall be called Immanuel...God with us... with us in spirit and the flesh; with us in the mystery and the manure; with us at Christmas and with us always.**