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Luke 2:1-20

Isaiah 9:2-7

Psalms 96

Titus 2:11-14

December 24, 2018

Christmas Eve: The Nativity of Our Lord

I saw a funny picture the other day. It was of a snowman. But this wasn't just any snowman. It wasn't white and pristine with perfectly shaped graduating round snowballs for its body. It didn't have a lovely black top hat, red scarf, and the perfect carrot nose. No, this "snowman" was made of mud. Three mud balls to be exact that seemed to melt into one another in a defeated attempt to look acceptable. Its hat was cocked to the side and its face drooped into a sad frown. And the caption read...Merry Christmas from Virginia.

I couldn't help but laugh at the truth behind this mudball snowman. How much we want things to look pretty and put together but all too often they just come out messy and misshapen. When our expectations confront reality and we have to begin forming something out of what we are given, imperfect as it may be.

So what does mud have to do with Christmas? Well, the more I thought about mud, the more I thought it was indeed the perfect image for this evening. Because most of us who live around here have been spending a lot of time in the mud lately...tramping through water logged pastures, getting our boots stuck in inches deep thick mud, watching the river rise and roads flood and we may have begun to wonder when it will all end as rain keeps showing up in the forecast. We are desperately in search of hope...or at least a mudball snowman to remind us that something is possible out of this mess.

But maybe the inundation of rain and snow and mud these last few weeks has a gift hidden within the muck and mire. Because mud can be a rather magical substance. (Now, I know this isn't exactly scientifically accurate but play along with me)...As mud thickens it becomes something like a thick clay and clay, when formed just right by a potter's hands can become beautiful works of art as it hardens.

This evening, on Christmas Eve, I thought it fitting that we spend some time considering the value of clay – the substance of potential – that substance that emerges out of the mud to offer something creative and hopeful.

In the Bible, clay jars are a familiar symbol of our humanity. You can think of clay jars in two ways – the first is an image of our weakness, of our chipped and fragile selves, the broken pieces of our lives – the places we struggle, the hardship we face. To be sure, this fragile image isn't meant to be a defeating image but simply one of fact...it's who we are. Life isn't always easy to say the least. That's the fragile jar.

But, you can also think of clay jars as representing who we can become because of God's desire to form us into something stronger, to take those broken and chipped pieces and craft

something more beautiful out of our imperfections. That's where the gift of Jesus Christ comes in – the potter who can do something with this clay.

2 Corinthians 4 states...For it is God...who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." But we have this treasure in clay jars, so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power (this power of rebuilding and remaking) belongs to God and does not come from us. We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down but not destroyed...."

That is God's gift to us. Corinthians is saying that even in our weakness, even in our messiness, we are loved so much by God that God reaches down into our lives and begins to form us anew. God knows we can't do it all on our own so he gives us a chance to cast our burdens, our fears, our imperfections on Jesus. It's the kind of gift that comes from a loving, compassionate God who wants us to live in strength and hope and joy. And there is no greater gift than Jesus - who sees our potential and crafts out of the clay something good.

The point is that we are broken. We need a Savior. We can't go it alone. And thankfully, Christmas is upon us. Jesus has come to be with us. Our response is simply to allow Jesus to come into our lives to create something of beauty out of our weakness. To heal the parts of ourselves and this world that have been chipped and shattered. To take the weak, imperfect clay jar and remake it into a work of art.

Bishop Desmond Tutu describes God's love through the gift of Jesus this way,

"Dear Child of God, you are loved with a love that nothing can shake, a love that loved you long before you were created, a love that will be there long after everything has disappeared. You are precious, with a preciousness that is totally quite immeasurable. And God wants you...to be filled with life and goodness and laughter—and joy. God, who is forever pouring out God's whole being from all eternity, wants you to flourish. God wants you to be filled with joy and excitement and ever longing to be able to find what is so beautiful in God's creation...."

That's the heart of Christmas. The Christmas story is so much more than the familiar story of Mary and Joseph, baby Jesus and the shepherds. It's so much more than the angels proclaiming Christ's birth. All of those things are miraculous and good but the Christmas story goes so much farther. Christmas may have begun in Bethlehem but it has moved into the present so that our lives are intertwined intimately with God's gift of Jesus Christ from generation to generation.

I read a great quote the other day that said, "A saint is someone whose life has not been sufficiently researched." In other words, there is not one person (no matter how good they may seem) who doesn't need the gift of Jesus. We have all been broken or chipped at one time or another. We have all found ourselves searching for hope, for the possibility to start again, to rebuild. That's part of being human.

That's when we need to be reminded of God's gift to us. And so, we come each year to hear the story and marvel in the miracle, to listen again and again to these familiar words of grace and love and hope. Because we want to hear, we need to hear that through Christ, God loves us. It's the kind of love that heals you and forgives you. It's the kind of love that welcomes and embraces you.

So this Christmas, I want you to hear the words of the angels spoken directly to you.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them (and to each of you), "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"

May God's love embrace you and remake you. May it take your burdens and give you peace. And may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.