

Splendor in the Squalor

Rev. David Reynolds

Luke 2: 1-20

I always think Christmas Eve is a night for poetry. Something about it longs to have ordinary life somehow broken open as a vista of sacred space, which I think is what poetry does. So, I'll begin with a poem. It's entitled: Horses at Christmas, and it's by Henry Shukman.

Horses at Christmas

In our little house Creedence were singing
about the old cotton fields, the baby
was flat on his back in front of the fire,
eyes swimming with flame.
Christmas morning, and you were at church.
I thought of going to join you late,
but instead took the baby up to the horses.
Out in the field he started crying.
Maybe I should have taken him to the bath
of stone, the discipline of a saviour, the sanctuary
of hymns --

But the horses saved us.

To be close to them, so tough and nothing
to do with us, and their breathing all over him,
and the flaking mud on their necks
where they had rolled, and the sucking of hooves
as they walked the sodden field.
The horses with their long heads,
underwater eyes, watched us watch them.
Then they turned, drumming the field,
leaving us alone – the damp morning
all about, the soaked grass under foot,
the baby's diaphanous ears going pink in the cold
as silence bowed back to earth.

It's that, isn't it, this night? The silence. The silence bowing back to earth. It's horses with flaking mud on their necks, somehow ably doing the work of our baptism, bringing us into new life, bringing us to an inner place of true worship, opening up the possibility of lives lived following a savior. Horses with flaking mud on their necks.

It's no accident that the story of this night is set in a stable. The only problem is that we've heard the story so many times that we may not be able to really hear it as it is anymore. I read about a Christmas display that someone had seen at a mall. It featured giant plush bears robed as Mary and Joseph, beaming at a swaddled Baby Jesus bear in the manger. Three jolly, plush bears now convey everything we know or expect to know about this story? No. This story is closer to horses with mud flaked on their necks. There's squalor in this story, and hardship.

It's a story about peasant refugees after all, hard pressed under the boot of Roman taxes. They travel some sixty or more miles, with her pregnant, on foot. Hardship. And the baby is born in the stinkiness of a stable. And the first visitors to that stable are shepherds. Again, don't think children's Christmas pageants with kids in bathrobes. Think squalor. Think mud. Think sheep dung. Think uneducated, homeless, disadvantaged, perennially poor. We know something of that, although we might not want to hear about it tonight.

But, we've been in emergency rooms on occasion. And we've at least been by homeless shelters, or seen them on T.V. Maybe we've walked by someone asleep in a cardboard box on the sidewalk. We've seen people living in poverty, in New Orleans after Katrina, and right around us here, too. And truth be told, even the most well-to-do among us have squalorous aspects of our lives and hearts. We have known misery and hopelessness in body, or in spirit. And so the question for us tonight is: How will we adore *Him*? As we sang in our first hymn, it is why we have come here tonight, isn't it? "O come let us adore Him?" But, if we don't want to think about the squalor of our world, or even of our own lives or hearts, how will we adore Him? Because according to our story, that's where he's to be found. Like a great poem, God comes holding together squalor and splendor, tying them together as one.

Listen again to this story! There is the smell of a horse stable and there is the song of angels. There is the violence of Rome and there is the peace proclaimed to God's people on earth. There is the exclusion implied with the socially unacceptable shepherds, and the ultimate inclusivity of God's justice. There is the way Mary and Joseph are pushed off to the margins, made to stay in a stable, no room and the way the birth of Jesus makes that smelly stable in a backwater town, the very center of the world. There is the illiteracy of the shepherds, whose testimony was acceptable in a court of law at the time, bearing eloquent witness to the meaning of this birth.

The story is a bundle of contrasts and contradictions. It is a holding together of squalor and splendor. And that's how and why it declares the truth of this night: God is with us. Our lives are just such a bundle of contrasts and contradictions. How else could we say God is truly with us? This is the news too good not to be true, isn't it? God's love and acceptance isn't just for the pious and the perfect. It's for you. You have a place in the world. And God's grace doesn't just come in moments of quiet contemplation. It comes also, right when we're feeling old, or blue, right in the middle of chaos and commotion. Right in the squalor of your life, in emergency rooms, and where people's hearts are broken over a diagnosis of terminal cancer, or over the death of a loved one.

God's grace comes where people struggle for their dignity and worth. It comes when peace is spoken and lived in the midst of war zones. It comes in the moment of triumph in the middle of worry. It comes in the moment of love when everything seems loveless. It comes in the moment of hope, when everything seemed hopeless. God comes holding together squalor and splendor, opening up our lives as vistas of sacred space.

William Butler Yeats, in a stanza from his poem "Vacillation," wrote these words:

My fiftieth year had come and gone,
I sat, a solitary man,
In a crowded London shop,
An open book and empty cup
On the marble table-top
While on the shop and street I gazed
My body of a sudden blazed;
And twenty minutes more or less
It seemed, so great my happiness,
That I was blessed and could bless.

That I was blessed and could bless... a call is part and parcel of God's grace-filled coming in our lives, this night and always. And it is the call to bless. It is also no accident that God comes as an infant born in squalor. For in caring for such a helpless one, we participate in the very same love of that One, for us. We are called to the love of a parent for their child, that

sometimes suffering parental love, extended to all creation. That *is* God's love for us, isn't it? Frederica Mathewes-Green tells the story of a mother and her teenage son. On a cold day in December, a mother gave birth to a baby boy. Seventeen years later, he sat in her kitchen with a towel around his neck while she trimmed his hair.

When a boy reaches a certain age, he doesn't like his mother to touch him anymore. This is as close as she's likely to get, circling him, nipping behind his pink ears with scissors. An hour earlier, Nancy hadn't known if he was alive or dead. He had been arrested with a baggie full of drugs and swore he would either flee to Mexico or kill himself. But on his trial date, he came home one last time, to borrow his brother's shoes and have his mom trim his hair. She circles him, sifting through his hair with measuring fingers, and dark broken wisps drift to her arms like jumbled dashes. A couple of hours later, he is in the back of a police car. They must leave for the state school immediately. The boy stares stonily ahead as his parents stand outside the car, leaning together like wind-battered trees. Say good-bye, the officer instructs. "I don't know them," the boy mutters. The car door slams, and he is gone.

On a cold day in December, a mother gave birth to a baby boy. Have you heard that story before? ...On a cold, star-pierced night, a frightened girl gave birth in a stable. When she carried her baby into the temple a few weeks later, an old man stopped her to say: "This child will be a sign that is spoken against. And a sword will pierce through your own soul also." Maybe this crazy thing happened: God came among us and walked and taught and offended us and finally we tortured him and put him to death. And by dying that death at our hands and being raised up to return to us still loving us, Christ defeats death's power to control our lives.

Says Mathewes-Green: "Into this universe crammed with pain we say that God came down, because (God) loves us with the kind of love that we can only understand by thinking of how a parent loves. (God) longs over us as over a lost and contemptuous child, a child at the edge of gaping danger, ignorant, sulky, and rude. We spurn, laugh, ignore him, pinch each other, boast "I don't know him," slam the door. And (God) waits. ... Later that evening, Nancy looked up at the stars and thought, he's getting there about now.

It's hard to come to a new place in the dark; so many buildings lined up side by side with their windows black. She thought of him lying awake in a strange bed, wondering what lay ahead. She wondered if he was scared. She thought about her little boy." That's it. With that kind of love, for each one, enemy and friend, for all of creation, *that's* how we adore *Him*. Come, let us adore him. He's here among us, coming as splendor in the squalor. Breaking open our ordinary lives as sacred vistas.

Even in this bread broken and shared. Even in this common cup poured out. Come, like every night, it is a holy night indeed.

Amen.