

The nativity scene is a central part of our Christmas celebration. Crèche's like the one here (point to the crèche) adorn our homes and churches. Parents and grandparents gather to watch with pride as children are transformed into lambs, angels and shepherds. Although we know the story, we eagerly anticipate the arrival of Joseph & Mary into Bethlehem, the Angels' "rejoice" and Jesus' birth in a manger. So familiar has the nativity scene become, that once set, we may not pay it much attention at all. Yet occasionally something very different and striking occurs in the nativity that captures our attention and invites us to pause and perhaps, think newly or even differently about God's in-breaking.

Climbing into the backseat of the car at school pickup, 5-year old Milo turned to his Mum and said

"Mum, Guess what I am for the Nativity? I'm a classic one!"

"A Classic one", Mum pondered, and then taking a guess, "Joseph?"

"Nooooo" said Milo.

"Ok, she said, One of the three wise men?"

"Nooooo."

"Hmmm. A classic role, it is, a classic part?, she asked to which Milo answered a definitive "Yeah."

Stumped, she said, "Ok, you tell *me*."

Suddenly bubbling with excitement, Milo announced proudly

"I'm door holder number 3! I'll be holding doors!"

Not missing a beat, Mum said: "That's Amazing!" Followed by, "Holding doors for who?"

Thoughtfully, Milo answered, "um, Probably, for Joseph and Mary."

"O my gosh!" His mom said, "were you pleased when they said that?"

And then Milo really lit up: "And I was like, I'm a door holder!

And stepping right into the role, said, "Get in there, Let's go! Yes!

And added, 'I'll probably have to wear, like, brown."

"Really?" Mum asked, "Yeah, probably" said Milo.

Smiling, his Mum said, "That's really smart, Milo!"

I suspect that most of us would not imagine a Nativity scene with a Door Holder. Maybe Milo's role as the door holder was to hold it open for Mary and Joseph to enter the stage, or perhaps it was to hold open the door to the barn or cave where Jesus would be born,

beckoning to a very pregnant Mary and her husband Joseph, “Get in there! Let’s Go! Yes!” Thrilled to play a part, Milo seemed to understand that to be a door holder was important, and indeed, Classic. As a door-holder, he will be one who makes a way forward, a bearer of holy hospitality and of welcome.

Across the world, in Bethlehem where this year Christmas has been canceled, lies another unusual Nativity Scene. Tucked inside the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Bethlehem at the foot of the lectern, is a large pile of jagged rocks and rubble, a painful, visual reminder of the devastation of war that today plagues the Holy Land and makes rejoicing impossible. And lying there, wrapped in a simple cloth, is the Christ Child. “God is under the rubble in Gaza,” said the Rev. Dr. Muncher Isaac, pastor of the church. “He is with the frightened and the refugees. He is in the operating room. He walks through the valley of the shadow of death with the people of the Holy Land.”

These examples offer contradictory images and contexts of the Nativity. On this night when we gather to remember, claim and celebrate God’s coming to dwell with humanity, in one breath we anticipate with joy the hoped-for peace and possibility promised us by God; while in the next, we breathe a sigh as we hold with heavy hearts the reality that even with Christ’s coming, pain, suffering and division still plague our world and our lives.

Perhaps this is the truth of our human existence: that in the midst of joy, we also know sorrow. Fear, trepidation, worry and more may take residence within us, and so it is good that we gather together on this holy night, hoping and praying for God to enter in; to restore in us the hope we may have lost; to heal within us the wounds that fester; to assure us that Christ’s promised reign of peace is not just mere words, but will come, and come soon.

This year, for all that it is, and all that it isn’t, it’s the Christmas we’ve got. The invitation is to trust that God’s incarnation, Jesus, will meet us right where we are, filling us with the radiant light that shines in the darkness, and which the darkness shall not overcome. Seeing Christ in the rubble may be painful, and yet, we are reminded that even in the worst moments of our lives, in the depths of our personal loss and sorrow, even in times when human beings treat one another with hatred and aggression — Christ is there and will be found.

Until that time, let us cling tightly to one another tonight, in gratitude. Let us give thanks for a God who loves us so much that he chose to dwell among us. And always, Let us be bold and passionate door holders like Milo, who eagerly open the doors to our hearts and call out to Christ, saying “Get in here! Let’s go! Yes!” Amen.