

23 December, 2007
4th Sunday of Advent
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So I'm thinking about Thanksgiving, which was either a very long time ago or yesterday, depending on how time is flying for you. I'm remembering how I went into it with my usual naiveté. The Patton clan was descending upon Longview from parts of California and I was preparing to be Queen of the Kitchen, with my newly remodeled kitchen everything was going to be perfect.

I had the menu planned, well-shopped, everything laid out and chopped and thought through and it was all just going to be exquisite. My two young nieces, now professional women, were going to be inspired by my cooking. My sisters-in-law were going to admit that really was the best cook in the family, and my mother was going to acknowledge that I'm grown up.

And you know how this goes, right?

So, everything was all ready. Of course, I don't pay any attention to those little pop-up things on the bird. Who needs a stinking pop-up, right? I had this fancy new gadget that plugs directly into the oven that lets me know when my turkey is done. So, of course, the turkey was done forty minutes before I expected it to be. And that throws the whole thing into a panic – my cool, calm, collected thing where I was just going to be gracious hostess (I was even in my dress already!). But I was like, "Aahhhh! It's done now!" So all of a sudden, the kitchen is mayhem. I grab my inexperienced nieces who try to mash the potatoes with a, uh, *whisk*.

Everyone's flying around and trying to do the best they can and in the midst of it, I just puddled. I just crashed. All my composure, all my queenliness melted around my feet. My good husband was there to help pick up the pieces and my sisters-in-law and my brothers who are all pretty sympathetic people all pitched in and did what they could and in the end, well, dinner got on the table. And you know, the funny thing about it is, the turkey was actually raw. It had to go back in the oven, so all the food we hastily threw together was cold by the time the turkey was ready.

So, no, not queen, not Queen of the Kitchen, no not queen, but something else. I was at the heart of a loving family who all got to do their part. My useless nieces actually got to feel important, for pity's sake, and I didn't threaten anybody's sense of being the best cook in the family, that's for sure!

It was really actually a lot of fun, and we were together in a different way than we would have been if I had had it all together and been the Queen of the Kitchen. So, it was a disaster, but not a terrible disaster. Maybe it was exactly the way it was supposed to be. Maybe it was better than it would have been if it hadn't been a disaster. I'm not saying I'm not going to try again next year.

From a certain perspective, it could be said that the Incarnation was a disaster. There are lots of stories about miraculous births. Both classical literature and the scriptures

are full of them; where there is some great hero or god or somebody to be born, they usually have some attending miracle that lets you know that the Divine Hand was involved from the very beginning. Think of Samuel, think of Isaac, think of Samson, think even of John the Baptist.

Usually in these stories, however, the birth is a very welcome event. Very often, we're talking about an older woman who's been barren for some years and has longed for a child. [One] whose place in her family, in fact, in ancient civilizations you know, a woman wasn't really secure in her family until she produced a male heir. So this was very good news when the wanted baby finally comes. And then of course she presents it to God and then the baby grows up and goes on to do something important. Everybody is delighted.

This story is different, isn't it? Again, it's a miracle birth story. It has the same intention as the others, which is to show God's hand in the life of our hero – in this case, Jesus – from the very beginning. But in this case, God's hand seems to have slipped and made a mess of things. For this is no older woman pining for a child, desperate for a way to fit into her family. This is a young girl who's planning to get married to a man who is not the father of this baby. This is truly a disaster.

An unplanned pregnancy. A threat to Mary's security. Joseph intends, it says, to put her away, basically. It was tantamount to divorce in those days. If he'd married her, it would have disgraced and dishonored him. And if he doesn't marry her, it would disgrace and dishonor her. There were times when a woman might even be stoned for this. And because Joseph wants to be compassionate, he decides to do it privately instead of publicly so she doesn't have to deal with the legal consequences of her pregnancy.

Kind of wild, isn't it? And of course, the delivery happens in exactly the wrong time, too, right? The family is on the road, there's no room at the inn, remember that? It's a miraculous birth story, but it's a very odd one, isn't it?

It seems that the Good News starts out as trouble. And this is fitting, because Jesus' whole life was trouble. It was not about triumph, it was not about success, it wasn't particularly even about peace. Jesus brought trouble everywhere he went and his life ended with more trouble.

But the Good News proclaimed in the midst of the Incarnation and the rest of Jesus' life, death and resurrection is that God's presence is with us. Emmanuel. God is with us, in the midst of chaos, alienation, suffering and the ordinariness of life. Even inconveniences and annoyances like not being able to find a hotel room when you really need it.

This fourth Sunday of Advent invites us to make room for untidiness. Make room for disruption. Make room for discomfort and welcome it with the trust and faith that when our plans and our dreams go south on us, God is with us. Sometimes in ways we could not have hoped, dreamed or expected.

And if, with Mary, we can give permission for God to come to us and not look for the miracle in perfection and glory but look for it in the messy stable where the flies are... in the disruption and the disappointment, we have the chance of experiencing the miracle of the Incarnation.

So today we have baptisms. Three of them. Very exciting. And I want to make a charge to you parents, godparents, grandparents and supporting community. My charge to you is that you seek Christ in these children. In Sophia and Reese and Casey. Seek Christ in them. Our baptismal vows require us to seek Christ in all persons, loving our neighbor as our selves.

But as you seek Christ in these children, you will be tempted to look for Christ only in their gifts and their successes and their talents and accomplishments and their triumphs as they grow. I challenge you: Watch more carefully. Pay attention for Christ's presence, especially when they upset your plans. When they defy your expectations. When they disappoint you and disrupt you and take paths you would never have chosen for them or for yourself.

And when that happens, remember the Incarnation. Remember that disaster, and how Christ comes to us in the midst of the upset. In a world turned upside down. In children, we cannot predict or control, though we do try to guide and care for them. In children who come to us with their own paths and destinies. In children who invite us to transformation, to sacrifice and discovery; humility and the truest kind of love.

If we let them, they will undo us. And that will be okay. That will put us back together, if we let God, and we will experience God's presence in real and unimaginable ways.

There's a wonderful poem I want to close with. [It's] by the writer, Madeline L'Engle, who wrote those great Wrinkle in Time books which will be much more interesting to you all when these kids are ten years older. She wrote a little poem about Advent called 'The Irrational Season', and I love to quote it:

This is the irrational season
When love blooms bright and wild
If Mary had been full of reason
There'd have been no room for the child.

Amen.