

Christmas Eve 4pm 24 Dec 2017

Cat in the Manger

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Note: this sermon was delivered extemporaneously without written text or notes from the aisle, the text below represents the sermon when it was in progress, but may be different from what was delivered on the day.

Thank you so much for helping tell the story of Jesus' birth! You all did a wonderful job! Just look how beautiful it is, and how nice to see our stable so full! This is one of my favorite parts of Christmas, getting to fill our stable and tell the story of Jesus together.

Every year at Christmas we hear the same story, year after year, because it is one of those very important stories that grows as we grow. Look at you! You all have grown since we heard the story last year. As we grow, the way we see things also grows and changes, which means we will outgrow some stories, but other stories, like this story, is so good, so important, that it will actually grow with us. And every year we hear or help tell the story, a different part will be just for you, it will have something for you. That is one way the Holy Spirit speaks to us.

So....now I am wondering, this year: what part of the story was just for you?
(People/children give their answers.)

Thank you for sharing what part of the story was just for you. I know it is not always easy to do that, and I am glad you did. Because it helps us all to hear how the Holy Spirit is working in all of us.

This year, as I heard the story once again, I couldn't help but notice there were a lot of animals in the story. Do you remember which animals were part of the story? Yes, and all the animals were the kind that would live in a stable. In fact, I remember the angel told the shepherd that they would know Jesus from all other babies because he would be in a manger, a box animals ate out of. Isn't it interesting that Jesus was first found with animals?

This reminds me of a legend that has almost been forgotten; a legend about the night Jesus was born in a stable with the ox and the donkey and all the other animals. The legend is about another animal that isn't mentioned in the story today, but legends are types of stories passed down from history that could very well hold a truth we are meant to carry with us.

The legend goes that when Jesus was born he was a beautiful baby. And his mother Mary wrapped him in his swaddling clothing and fed him and then she put him in that food box, that manger, filled with fresh straw for a bed. But guess what? Straw is not soft or comfortable sleeping material. Even through all those swaddling clothes the

Baby Jesus felt the prickly straw and it made him cry. Being a newborn baby, Jesus could really belt it out too, he cried loud and he cried long and poor Joseph and poor Mary, who were already tired from their journey and from giving birth, no matter what they did to try and comfort Baby Jesus he just would not stop crying.

Mary tried to sing him a lullaby. But he didn't stop crying. Joseph tried holding Jesus and walking around the stable, but he didn't stop crying. They changed his diaper. Still he cried. They rubbed the back of his tiny, soft baby head. He still cried and cried and cried. Sounds pretty miserable, doesn't it?

When they ran out of parenting tricks to try, another animal crawled out of the straw and came over to the manger. It was an animal like this: Yes! A cat! And when Mary put the squalling Baby Jesus back into the manger, the cat knew just what to do to soothe a crying baby, maybe because she remembered being comforted by her own mother when she was a kitten, or had comforted her own newborn kittens. First, the cat came close to the Baby Jesus, but she didn't get on him, she knew he was too little for that. But she got close enough that the Baby Jesus could hear her purring, and could feel the warmth of her body. And that purring helped him start to settle down. Then she softly touched him with her paws, she kept her claws in, and gently massaged his chest while she purred. And it worked! Baby Jesus fell sound asleep! Mary, Jesus' mother was so grateful to the cat for putting her baby to sleep that she bent down and kissed the cat on the top of her head. And that is when stripes appeared on the cat's head that formed the shape of an M for Mary. Today, many cats still bear the mark of Mary's gratitude for the role a cat played in helping baby Jesus fall asleep.

Isn't that a lovely legend? Legends are funny things, we don't know if it is a fact, if it is something that actually happened, but there is something to it. Several artists from years ago like Leonardo da Vinci must have heard that legend because they did sketches like this one that show Mary, Baby Jesus, and a cat! This might make us wonder if it did happen, did the cat stay with Jesus as he grew up? And maybe, Jesus loved the comfort the cat gave, and she might have taught him something. Remember, when Jesus grew up one of the many wonder things he did was give comfort to people by healing them. I don't know for sure, but maybe.

Maybe the legend of the cat in the manger and the animals in our nativity scene remind us that Jesus was born to show us that God loves us, and God loves all the world, everything that God had made, and that we can all live together in peace. So maybe this Christmas, we might all take another look at the animals in our lives. Our pets, the wild birds outside, the squirrels, and watch what they might show us about the love of God, and what we might do to show them love too.

I know what let's do, let's start by adding this cat to our nativity scene. Who will help me? Where is the best place for this cat? Oh, that sounds wonderful. There, she looks happy there, and so does Mary and Joseph, and especially Baby Jesus.

Thank you. And Merry Christmas to you!