

My grandmother had a nativity set that was the stuff of legend. She had made it herself during her ceramics class days, when she was a young mother raising my dad and his four siblings. I imagine that her time in this class was precious to her, the only personal time she got in a life filled with laundry and cooking and trying desperately to keep my father from breaking yet another bone in his tiny Takacs body. (My grandmother used to joke that whenever she heard an ambulance her first thought was, “Where’s Frank?”) Compared to that, ceramics class must have felt like heaven – the pleasing sight of pots of shining paint, the sound of calm, adult conversations, the pleasure of having only one thing to do at a time. And, of course, the pristine figure set before her, quiet and still, making no demands, breaking no bones, asking for nothing but that she do with it what she will.

She chose what I imagine must have been the largest possible set of nativity figures, 18” high at least. An interesting choice for a

woman whose five kids didn’t leave much space for anything extra in the tiny, boxy, post-war brick construction they called home. But it was the large figures she chose, and a large number of figures as well. Mary and Joseph and the babe in the manger. An ox and an ass and at least one angel. There were shepherds and a gathering of sheep, three wise men bearing their gifts and – always a point of fascination for me as a child – the camels they rode in on. It must have taken her weeks to paint all of that clay, blending just the right jewel tones for the wise men’s robes, taking the time to sprinkle a little gold onto the angels’ wings, working meticulously to paint each piece of straw that cradled the baby Jesus. I like to think of her out in the evenings, focused and quiet, smiling to herself when she was pleased with her work and handing over another figure to be fired in the kiln with deep satisfaction before heading back, before heading home.

I have come to realize that it’s because of my grandmother’s nativity set that I still have not found my own. I should clarify – I do

have a few nativity sets displayed in our home. One is carved from olive wood from the Holy Land. One is unfathomably tiny ceramic figures made in 19th century France. One is Peanuts characters, with Snoopy as the shepherd and Woodstock wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in the manger. I love all of these, but I don't think of them as "my nativity set." I'm still looking for something significant enough to earn that title, and to be honest I've had a hard time finding it. My grandmother's nativity set a very high bar. I'm still searching for one like hers: striking and grand but also made by hand and with love; simple but not rustic, artistic but not artsy, preferably with colors that glow in the candlelight and beckon you to look closer; accurate enough to resemble first-century Bethlehem instead of an eighteenth-century Italian village but not so accurate that it doesn't have wise men and shepherds and angels and all, no matter what the Gospels say. High bar, indeed.

I'm sure I'm not the only one who has a romantic, enduring

connection to a nativity set. There's something wondrous and precious about them. Whether they're handed down from generation to generation or purchased shiny and new, displayed in your home or in your church or part of an exhibit at a museum, made of wood or ceramic or stone, nativities have a miraculous quality about them and a unique effect on us. They provide for us a moment not unlike the moment I imagine my grandmother had when she was creating hers: a moment of calm in a world of chaos. Nativity sets invite us to stop and be still, to do nothing at all but look and then look a little closer. Here in this nativity, all is calm, all is bright. The cattle aren't even lowing here. All the figures – ox, wise man, camel, shepherd, mother, angel, baby – are held in a moment of quiet contemplation, settled and still. There is no distraction, no noise, no need. All are filled and all are satisfied.

But Luke reminds us tonight that nativity sets are not the end of the story. This scene in the manger is not the last scene of

Christmas night. For after the angel appeared to the shepherds in their fields in the night, and after the multitude of heavenly host surrounded them with singing and promises of peace on earth and goodwill to all people, and after the shepherds ran full-tilt to see this thing that had been told to them, and after they explained to the astonished holy family who they were and why they were there, and after they sat in wondrous amazement while Mary pondered these things in her heart, the shepherds kept running. The shepherds returned, Luke tells us, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen. The shepherds left the nativity set, went flying off into the night full of the story of what they had seen. They went back, went home to the same fields, to the same sheep, to the same stars in the same night sky, knowing that while everything seemed the same, they were wholly different.

On a night like this, it's easy for us to forget what happened after the nativity scene. On a holy night like this, glowing with the

presence of the newborn Christ, it's easy for us to want to crawl into this crèche and never, ever leave. After all, why wouldn't we want to linger here forever? It's supremely lovely here, beautiful and calm. There is no poverty here, no injustice, no heartbreak. There is no cancer here, no addiction, no death. There are no racists here, no powermongers, no one who will betray us or hurt us or lead us astray. Here there is only peace. Here there is only a promise fulfilled. Here there is only mercy and kindness, truth and hope, generosity, and patience, and love. Why would we ever want to leave?

But as you stand here, looking long at these figures held in this moment of peace, I invite you to lean in close. I invite you to ask the shepherds that very question and listen carefully for their answer. How could we leave this nativity? Actually, it was quite easy. We had found the one we thought would be lost to us forever. We had followed the voice of the angels, left 99 sheep in the fields, to find the one we thought would never be found – what else could we do but

call together our friends and neighbors and share our joy? Of course the moment by the manger was holy, of course there was part of us that wanted to stay forever. That moment held us in a love that hung as thick in the air as the smell of straw. But we knew, too, that even as we stepped out into the quiet night – as we left that nativity – that love, that moment, that finally-found child, would never leave us.

In a few moments, we will fall on our knees and sing Silent Night. We will be as still and as peaceful and as full-hearted as the figures in any nativity. And then we will leave – go back out into the night, just as we have done for a thousand Christmas Eves, just as those shepherds did all those centuries ago. But this night, remember the shepherds. You may be going back to your homes, back to your families, back to the broken bones of real life, back to a planet that is dying and a nation in crisis and all of the cares and concerns that pull at you all day every day. You may be going back into the same night, the same world, the same life. But you will be different. Because you

know that this nativity has changed everything. You know that this Christ child has brought a light into the world that cannot be overcome. You know that Jesus Christ has come to break the rod of the oppressor, to bring us endless peace, to uphold the whole world with righteousness and justice. You know that because you been a part of this holy nativity, this nativity will never leave you. So go, walk out with the shepherds. Bear the truth of this holy night into the hungry world, glorify and praise the God who made us and redeemed us and loves us still. Share the good news that in Christ, there can be peace on earth and goodwill to all people; that in Christ, there will be peace on earth and goodwill to all people. For beloved, on this holy night, you have been made into something wondrous and supremely lovely. You are striking and grand, simply crafted with great love, and glowing with a light that beckons all who see you to look closer. And I suppose what I want to say is this: go out with the shepherds, dear ones, and be the nativity you want to see in the world.

Preached by Mother Erika Takacs

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