

# Spiritual Gatherings

DECEMBER 2015



*Worship with Us*

GUIDE TO PLACES OF WORSHIP IN THE THUNDER BAY AREA



# Stop and smell the stable



**Warning  
Smelly Christmas**



**Approved personal  
protective equipment  
must be worn**

Okay, at the risk of you losing you before this article even begins: the Little Drummer Boy and I don't get along. His annoying "shall I play for you, pa-rum-pum-pum-pum, on my drum?" drives me up the wall. Sure, give that baby a nice drum solo; that'll make it "smile at me" - not! And that bit with "the ox and the lamb keeping time"? What's that all about, some animal back-up band?

It's not that I dislike the tune itself. I dislike it because it's cloying. That drummer kid has no business in the Christmas story. It's the perfect example of weird things creeping into Nativity scenes. Like when along with the sheep and goats you see a camel in a crèche scene as though it happened to be in the neighbourhood and somehow squeezed itself through the door. Or moose. Or elves. Or Super Mario. I'm not kidding. I know, I know, it's all meant to be cute and fun, and I shouldn't be such a grouch and get over myself. So I'll admit that a drummer is not any less weird than a magi - those pagan Tarot card reading gypsy dudes in Matthew's Gospel (and nowhere else).

My point is, maybe our over-familiarity with the Christmas story is getting in the way of our understanding how weird it really was. I mean, if it involves pregnancies by virgins and old ladies, and soothsaying magi and pungent shepherds and fearsome angels, and God being born as a refugee in straw and mud and manure... then who's to say a drum-toting kid doesn't belong there?

## Sanitizing the Gospel

But if you really look at the story of God coming to us in Jesus it's hard to miss how it involved people of little importance and how scandalous it was. And once you notice that, you can't help but also notice how much we've sanitized this whole Christianity thing. Because anyone who thinks that respectability and being nice is what the Gospel is about, well, they never really listened closely to the original cast recording. Which includes songs sung by pregnant teenagers and pagan magicians and pregnant old women. No cute rum-pum-pum-pum songs, but heady songs of pulling dictators down from their thrones! Who came up with that?!

I'm pretty sure that if WE were to write the script for God to come and live among us in the flesh, it would be a much more respectable version. If it was up to us, Jesus would appear as some glorious hero in some place really impressive, like Rome. Or Parliament Hill, or the White House prayer breakfast. And in our version all the really important people would be present for it. They'd have titles like emperor and king and Prime Minister and Chief Executive Officer.

And if we were to choose who should announce Jesus' grand entrance, it wouldn't be that raging nutcase John the Baptist, it would be someone much more respectable, like Peter Mansbridge. In our version, God's son would arrive by limo or helicopter at an impressive prime-time happening, welcomed by VIPs and celebrities, with everyone taking selfies all over the place.

## Whose story is it anyway?

But that's not what we get in the story of Jesus, is it? Because in reality, Jesus snuck in under the radar, with only a feeding trough to lay his head, his parents homeless refugees on the run from a dictator. And later he would be executed like a common criminal and be buried in some borrowed tomb. Because if God just acted in ways we thought made sense, or in ways that were respectable and predictable to us, we could all just be our own gods (something we too often think we are already).

So here's the thing: God didn't come to us telling OUR story; God came to us telling GOD's story. Even a quick reading of the Bible will show you that God has always chosen the weirdest and most subversive ways of doing that. Only, it's easy to get caught up in the glam and the glitz. And our cute Nativity scenes with that exasperating drummer kid sometimes make us forget how subversive the original Christmas story really is.

I know of one pastor who had this great idea to help his congregation move away from our story back to God's story. He said, Christmas is the story of God entering into our mess, the pain and suffering we do to each other, the muck of our existence. In that stable Jesus was literally born into animal dung, into crap.

## Awkward...

So what this pastor did in his church was take down all the ornaments and the decorations and the Christmas tree they had spent hours and hours putting up. Next, he got into his pickup truck and went over to a nearby famer to pick up a load of horse and cow manure. And then, on the night right before the big Christmas service, he started to spread that manure throughout the church. He was "redecorating the church as though it was a real stable, not one of our sanitized Nativity scenes", as he put it. He scattered the manure in the aisles, under the pews, around the pulpit and the cross - everywhere.

The next day was... well, "awkward" doesn't even begin to describe it. People came dressed in their fineries for the big Christmas service; the place was packed because everyone wants to be at the Christmas service. And then they smelled the manure...! Some stepped into it, others weren't sure about going in, and everyone was confused. Was this some kind of sick joke? But no one left, he said. In fact, something unexpected happened: it was one of the most powerful services they'd ever experienced. What everybody walked away with was a renewed connection to this over-familiar story which they now heard in a way that was closer to how it was originally told. It made sense again - God's sense.

## Crazy Concepts

Now before you get all excited, I'm not promising we'll have manure scattered all over Pinegrove United Church's sanctuary. But I do promise a Christmas Eve service that is not syrupy; that drummer kid can forget about strutting his pa-rum-pum-pum-pum stuff. This Christmas let us try and look through the commercial frenzy and sticky sentimentality, and re-focus on God's sacred story for us. Stop shopping and smell the stable, and get blown away by its message that turns everything upside-down: of good news for the poor and oppressed, the sick and broken-hearted. The last shall be first and the weak will be strong. Is there any other government that has those crazy concepts on their list of priorities?



**Pastor Hubert Den Draak**

Let us remember the original story of Christ who was born in some grungy armpit-kind-of place, surrounded by some pretty dodgy folks. Remember that his mother was an unmarried teenage girl who with her boyfriend (who wasn't even the dad) was on the lam from the authorities. How the poor and exploited people celebrated Christ's birth. And how those in power tried to kill this child almost right from the get-go.

Weird? You bet! Subversive? Absolutely! That's the Christ story we need to hear again. The story of how God enters fully into the muck of our existence and brings new life, starting with those on the margins of society. I'm ready for that story because I know that I need it. I hope you are ready for it, too.

*Pastor Hubert Den Draak  
(who enjoys playing air drums)*

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