

Christmas 2019
The Rev. Emily Richards

God comes to ruin our Christmas

The nativity scene outside of The Methodist Church in Claremont, California depicts the Holy Family in three separate chain link cages. The new parents are gazing upon their son from a distance, reaching out to him in vain. This display has created quite a stir, stoking debate about the cherished, time-honored story we've come to celebrate tonight. In response to viewing this scene, one individual stated, "Shame on you! You have ruined Christmas for me."

At this time of year, we all end up becoming traditionalists. No matter how forward thinking we may believe ourselves to be, on this night we want things to be as they always were. We come to church to hear the picture postcard story of the newborn lying in the straw while shepherds and angels gaze upon him in wondrous adoration. We want to be comforted by the glow of the candlelight and the carols we've sung since our childhoods. "There is something wonderful about the familiarity of this tale, remarks writer Jan Richardson, "this sense of greeting longtime companions and traveling with them once again. It is one of the greatest gifts of the season, and one of the greatest dangers. Thinking I know this story, these companions, this terrain so well, navigating by the light of my own understanding, I risk missing what God might want to illuminate for me."

The Son of God was born into a world where an oppressive empire loomed large and where the religious leaders cared about their rituals and traditions than the suffering of their people. The first to receive news of Jesus' birth were not some dignitaries, but a motley crew of shepherds, the migrant workers of their day who were terrified by the celestial beings and their heavenly message. He was born into a world where he and his parents had to flee to Egypt as refugees, barely escaping the narcissist King who upon hearing of Jesus' birth ordered the slaughter of all firstborn sons. Claremont Methodist Church's provocative depiction of the Nativity reflects the perilous nature of the world Jesus entered and the world in which we dwell; and the willingness of God to risk everything, even the life of his own beloved son in order to reclaim us as God's own. To restore our world to its intended purpose: a place where no one is disposable, despised, lost or unworthy of love and dignity.

Fr. Greg Boyle, a Jesuit priest has spent the last three decades in a perilous filled with great despair and yet where he has found great delight. In a gang-heavy neighborhood of Los Angeles Fr. Greg created Homeboy Industries, which employs former gang members in businesses ranging from screen printing to a farmers' market and a bakery. Standing side by side in kinship with those in his neighborhood, bridging the distance that separates himself from the most despised in society, he has found companionship with Jesus. In an interview with *On Being's* Krista Tippett, he reflects, "I think we're afraid of the incarnation. The fear that drives us is that we have to have our sacred in a certain way. Fashioned perfectly, beautifully. It has to be gold-plated, cost millions, made by a cast of thousands. Created in our own image. And so, we've wrestled the cup out of Jesus's hand, and we've replaced it with a chalice, because who doesn't know that a chalice is more sacred than a cup, never mind that Jesus didn't use a chalice?"

The incarnation for Fr. Greg is about God bridging the distance between us, beckoning us to companion with Jesus in places we never expected to go and among people that we might even fear. In my experience the Incarnate One comes to us most clearly when all is not calm and all is not bright, but in the noisy chaos and messiness of life. After all, the light shines most brightly in the deepest darkness. That's when God surprises us. and decides to show up to unsettle our well-worn understanding of who God is and who we are.

The 1980s classic *Moonstruck* tells the story of Loretta played by Cher. Loretta does everything right. She takes care of her parents, has a good, practical job and is planning to marry a respectable and very boring man. She plays by all the rules until she falls in love with Ronnie - Nicholas Cage, a reckless, passionate man, who happens to be her fiancé's brother. In the scene that is the turning point of their budding romance Ronnie pleads with Loretta not to walk away from their relationship. "Love doesn't make things nice - it ruins everything. It breaks your heart. It makes things a mess. We aren't here to make things perfect. The snowflakes are perfect. The stars are perfect. Not us! We are here to ruin ourselves and to break our hearts and to love."

Into our sentimental celebrations, God comes among us and ruins our Christmas! In Jesus' reckless love, our world is turned upside down. God chooses vulnerability over

domination, humility over privilege, compassion over judgment. God disrupts our egocentric outlook, breaking through the rubble and devastation of our world to point us in a new direction; one of ever-expanding companionship. In the Christ child, God offers us a light and a hope which the world cannot give. The nativity story is a reminder that each and every one of us is called to share in the messy, risky work of the incarnation. God became one of us so that we could embrace more fully our own beautifully, flawed humanity. Amid the world's deepening dangers and darkness, we are invited to share in that Divine love we find not only born in the stable, but born on the borders, and at the margins, born anew within each of us this holy night. *Amen.*