Sunday, December 16, 1984
CRIBS AND CROSSES
Luke 2:22-35

When we think of Christmas season, certain images usually come to mind. For example, a comment frequently made about this season is that it is a time for the family to be together. Thus, Christmas cards often depict a family scene — a father and mother, several children, maybe grandparents, a Christmas tree in the living room, gifts under the tree, and outside it's usually winter time with snow. Almost always it's a rural landscape and there might even be a horse drawn sleigh. Everything is peaceful and almost too perfect.

I wonder why there are no scenes of people celebrating Christmas in an apartment in the middle of a large city, or in the sunny south, or in a low rent district. Surely not everyone leaves the cities at Christmastime to go somewhere into the countryside.

I wonder too, why there are no pictures of other kinds of families who celebrate Christmas? What about older people in nursing homes or retirement centers? What about two or three single individuals who share an apartment? What about the many single parent families? What about an individual who lives alone and has no one to spend Christmas with? Or here is an older couple who have one or more grown children and this year they are spending the holiday alone because the children are married and are visiting the other sets of parents.

Christmas can be and is a time of joy for many people, but for others it can be a time of tension and loneliness. As John Smeltzer pointed out in the first sermon in this series on Advent, Christmas and the Family, the sentimental Christmas of which we dream does not always coincide with the reality in which we live.

Christmas may indeed be a time for family — but we have to broaden our definition and understanding of family. Family can be, and is, any two or more people who care for each other and support each other.

In addition to the image of family and Christmas, another image which comes to mind particularly in relation to the Church and Christmas, is that of a children's Christmas pageant which depicts the nativity scene — Mary, Joseph, the baby Jesus, shepherds, angels, and the animals in the stable, plus the wise men.

At hundreds of Christian Churches this year, as in years past, eight-year old shepherd in their father's altered bathrobes, their mother's sandals, and shoe polish beards will call at cardboard mangers to be greeted by sullen eleven-year old Josephs, and Marys dressed in white sheets, all watch over by little angels with cardboard wings. When other people's children are in such a pageant, we consider it a theatrical scandal and a theological sacrilege. When our own child is in such a pageant, it is strangely the most inspiring event we ever witness and the highlight of our Christmas.

Just as our sentimental picture of the family at Christmas time does not always match what is actually going on in the world — so also our idea of what happened that first Christmas in Bethlehem may not be much like what really happened.

We've heard the Christmas story so many times that neither we nor Mary is surprised when the angel tells her she is expecting and tells Joseph not to worry. Mary believe she is blessed.

Joseph is not confused. Knowing how the story will end, everyone is in complete control and it all goes off without a hitch.

But the disarming things about children's pageants is that they never seem to work out that way. No matter how fine the bathrobes or how professional the make-up, or how great the quantity of hay on the stage, something invariably goes wrong. Mary, Joseph and the rest of the cast never seem to look as dignified, as pious, or as sure of themselves as they do no Christmas greeting cards.

The shepherds usually act as confused and dumbfounded as the sheep they are supposed to be watching over. Eleven year old Joseph is always embarrassed to be standing that close to Mary (or to any other girl for that matter); and Mary, despite her efforts to look like one who is "blessed among women," almost always looks like one who is confused, bewildered and about to giggle, and who has not the slightest notion of what to do with a baby, much less what her next line is supposed to be.

William Muehl, in his book entitled, "All the Damned Angels," tells about the truly unexpected happening in one of these children's Christmas pageants. Mr. Muehl was one of my preaching professors at Yale and a good story teller.

He and his wife had a son who was to be a shepherd in the annual Christmas pageant. After Mary and Joseph had taken their places around the manger, the angels came on the stage, about twenty little girls dressed in fluffy white gowns and sporting immense gauze wings. They spread themselves around the stage with suspicious symmetry. Then the shepherds appeared, an equal number of small boys dressed in burlap sacks and clutching an assortment of saplings which purported to be shepherd's crooks.

At this point, an unfortunate discovery came to light. In order to be sure that the angels and shepherds would strike a pleasantly balanced array on the stage, the drama coach had made a series of chalk marks on the floor. A circle for each angel and a cross for each shepherd. She had urgently instructed the children that they were all to find and stand on appropriate symbols. But unwisely this marking had been done when the pupils were wearing their ordinary clothes, shorts, skirts and overalls. When the angels came on in their flowing robes, each of them covered not only her own circle, but the adjacent cross as well.

The shepherds began looking for their places. Angels were treated as they never have been treated before. At last one little boy, who had suffered about all such nonsense that he could handle, turned toward the wings where the teacher in charge was going quietly mad and announced angrily, "These damned angels are fouling up the whole show. They've hidden all the crosses!"

And so, Christmas pageants are usually cute, often comic, sometimes ridiculous, but rarely are they what we envision as the way the Nativity really looked.

But maybe there's more truth in these uneven performances than we at first realize. That first Christmas, the birth of Jesus was not as religious and neat and smooth as we like to tell it. I'm sure that Mary did not look much like the queen of heaven that night in Bethlehem. Martin Luther surmised that she probably looked more like a rather confused, bewildered teenager and had not the slightest notion of what to do with a baby or what her next line was supposed to be. And Joseph, if he had any feelings at all, must've felt embarrassed. After all, he was in an embarrassing situation.

The shepherds, despite all that talk about “fear not” were as scared as you or I would be if a similar thing happened to us while we were at work. They were all in over their heads, wondering what people like them were doing on stage in a drama like this.

And oftentimes too, in our effort to oversentimentalize Christmas, to idealize it and make it too perfect; like the angels in that Christmas pageant, we cover up all the crosses. We forget that this baby Jesus grew up to be an adult and was put to death as a common criminal. WE forget that while Jesus was still a baby, his parents had to take him and flee to Egypt in order to save his life and that all the other boy babies in the region of Bethlehem were killed by an angry king.

Each year about this time there are legal controversies about whether or not nativity scenes should be places by local, state or the national government in various places. Government officials, including the Reagan Administration and other people as well, have argued that the nativity scene is part of a “secular folk festival,” that represents Christmas to many people, as opposed to being a religious holiday. Those kinds of statement are reminiscent of one heard on a December, 1978 “Phil Donahue Show,” “A nativity scene shouldn’t be controversial,” an audience member sputtered, “What the manger scene symbolizes everything.” I wonder why no one wants to put up crucifixion and Resurrection scene around Good Friday and Easter. By way of contrast, I saw a cartoon picturing an old man looking at a nativity scene in a department store window, and he was complaining that now the church is trying to horn in on Christmas.

But the birth of the Savior is and will always be controversial. It is much more than a secular folk festival, no matter how much we sentimentalize it. Before Mary gave birth, according to Luke’s gospel, she knew how controversial this event was going to be. She declared in the Magnificat — “God has shown strength with his arm. God has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts. God has put down the mighty from their thrones, and exalted those of low degree. God has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he was sent empty away.” When still as a tiny baby, Jesus was brought to the temple in Jerusalem, and as Simeon held the baby, he declared — "Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel.” This is more than just a harmless, helpless baby. It’s a bothersome birth!

To put it another way, with the birth of Jesus, God is turning our whole world upside down. This is the kind of scene that does not fit in with the other decorations on the courthouse lawn, or the White House lawn. It does not fit in with business as usual. We cannot use cribs to cover up crosses. Cribs and crosses must be seen together.

To speak of both cribs and crosses does not in any way take away from the joy and festivity of this season — in fact it adds to the celebration. Not only did God come to us and live among us — but God in Christ also suffered with us and for us, and overcame death and makes it possible for us to do the same.

Yes, this season is a time for festivity and for hearing angels sing, and the message of Advent and Christmas is especially for those who are lonely and depressed, for those who are sad.

The other day an elderly woman called me on the phone and in our conversation, she was lamenting the fact she and her husband, who is not well, have no family to be with this Christmas. They have no children and there are only one or two distance relatives who live far

away. I tried to reassure her that Christmas is for everyone and that she had a different kind of family, that I was her relative as well as many others.

In fact, the message of God with us, is especially for those who feel they have no families — for it tells them that god is with them. We see in the person of Jesus that God cares particularly for the lonely, the afraid. The Christmas message is that God comes to life's little places, to life's hidden places; God comes to life's forgotten people, neglected people, oppressed people and assures them of their importance in God's creation. God comes to all the Bethlehems of the world personally; comes to the little insignificant, out-of-way places outside the circle of the activities of life's Jerusalems.

God comes to the stables of the world, the slums of the world. Look for God to be personally present in all such places.

So, no matter what kind of family situation you have, Christmas is for you! The crib of Christmas reminds us not to be afraid of the crosses in life — they need not be covered up! God's power always overcomes them. God's love can never be stopped! Amen.