

Putting our Hearts and Stuffed Animals in the Manger

I am asking the ushers to hand out a small print of a picture a friend of mine sent me as one of those viral emails working its way across the internet. I think this one may have been around for a couple years, but I still think that it is a wonderful image. A nativity scene was erected in a church yard. During the night some folks came across this scene. An abandoned dog was looking for a comfortable, protected place to sleep. He chose the baby Jesus as his comfort. No one had the heart to send him away so he lay there with Jesus all night.



That live dog lying with Jesus in the manger is kind of like what the children have just done with their stuffed animals, placing them near the manger to be with and to be blessed by Jesus.

There are many sentimental Christmas songs and stories of people and animals bringing comfort to the poor infant Christ child shivering in the manger on a cold winter's night. In the well known Christmas song, a little drummer boy plays for the baby Jesus on his drum. In Max Lucado's lovely children's Christmas story, *The Crippled Lamb* Joshua, a lamb born with a bad leg, isn't strong enough to travel with the rest of the flock to the next valley so he stays behind with his friend the cow in the stable. That night in the stable a little baby boy was born and placed on the straw in the animal's feeding trough. Joshua heard the baby's mother say that he was the newborn king and, because the baby was shivering with cold, Joshua lay down next to him to keep him warm with his wool.

Another story that has worked its way by email across the internet is the story set in a large Russian orphanage near Christmas in 1994. Two Americans had come to help teach in the orphanage. That holiday season they told the story of Jesus' birth, which most of the children had never heard before. Many of the children sat at the edge of their stools so that they could catch every word of this amazing story. After the story was told the children were given paper, cloth and crayons to create a miniature manger. Following the instructions the children tore the paper into strips for straw and took a small square of flannel for the baby's blanket. Looking at each of the children's art work the American noticed that one of the little boys – Misha – had drawn two babies in the crèche. Quickly the American teacher called for the translator to ask why the lad put two babies in the manger? Crossing his arms in front of him and looking at his completed manger scene,

6-year old Misha began to repeat the story very seriously. For such a young boy having heard this story only once it was amazing that he related the happenings accurately....until he came to the part where Mary put the baby Jesus in the manger. Then Misha started to ad-lib. He made up his own ending to the story as he said..."and when Maria laid the baby in the manger, Jesus looked at me and asked me if I had a place to stay? Then Jesus told me I could stay with Him. But I told Him I couldn't as I didn't have a gift to give Him like everybody else did. But I wanted to stay with Jesus so much so I thought about what I had that maybe I could use for a gift. I thought maybe if I kept him warm, that would be a good gift. So I asked Jesus 'If I keep you warm, will that be a good enough gift?' And Jesus told me 'if you keep me warm, that will be the best gift anybody ever gave me'. 'So I got into the manger, and then Jesus looked at me and he told me I could stay with Him for always'. As Little Misha finished his story, his eyes brimmed over full of tears that splashed down his little cheeks. Putting his hand over his face, his head dropped to the table and his shoulders shook and he sobbed and sobbed. Like the crippled lamb in Max Lucado's story, little Misha created his own story where he could stay in the crèche and keep the baby Jesus warm.

That desire to be close, to be with the baby Jesus as he lies in his bed of straw, is the foundation of this family Christmas service where the children bring their stuffed animals to be with the baby Jesus. Last year we got a little carried away. It was one of those moments that could have been a winner in America's funniest home videos. I was supposed to be at the head of the procession, but instead as the procession began it seemed easier to let the children fill-in from their pews in front of me. The problem was that no one was leading the children so they followed the choir into the chancel and proceeded to literally stuff the crèche to almost bursting with their stuffed animals. How the crèche didn't burst and none of the antique, hand-carved, wooden figures was broken I'll never know. The children certainly brought their beloved stuffed animals and dolls to be close to Jesus. Maybe last year a little too close! But those stuffed animals all represent the children's hearts. When they bring them before the baby Jesus they are bringing themselves. It is as we sing in the third verse of the Christmas Carol, *In the bleak midwinter, "What can I give him, poor as I am? If I were a shepherd, I would bring a lamb; if I were a wise man I would do my part; yet what I can I give him, give my heart."*

Tonight, in this family Christmas Eve service, the children have led the way through the the simple act of devotion bringing their dolls and stuffed animals to be with and be blessed by Jesus. Remember how important children were to Jesus? Mothers and fathers were bringing their children to Jesus so he could lay his hand on them and hug them and bless them. When his disciples tried to shoo the children and their parents away, Jesus was furious. *"Let the little children come to me, he said, "do not stop them; for it is to such as these that the kingdom of God belongs. Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it."* (Mark 10:14-15)

This Christmas Eve I invite us who are adults to let the children lead us and become like a little child, coming to the crèche with wonder in our hearts. Come with wonder tonight in Holy Communion to meet the living Lord, the Son of the living God who was born not in a palace but in a humble stable. As we turn down the lights, light our candles and sing

Silent night keep a picture of this manger scene n your mind's eye. As an angel atop your Christmas tree catches your eye hear anew the chorus of *angels we have heard on high*. As you catch a glimpse of a tiny crèche in the midst of a mound of wrapping paper and presents remind yourself of the real meaning of Christmas. In whatever way you do it follow the children in bringing your heart to the stable to celebrate anew the holy birth.

We not only bring our hearts (through stuffed animals, through song, through imagination, devotion and prayer) to the manger; far more importantly by coming to that manger, by being born among us as a flesh and blood human being, God has brought his heart from heaven to earth. God has given himself to us. Somehow the grandeur of God was born in the littleness of earth. And ever since God took on human life and flesh God has placed his life among us. He shares our humanity. He promises to be with us always. He walks beside us. He even places his life within us; shining his light within our hearts. By becoming human God shares all our life with us. He even chooses to share our casket. He shared our death as he died for us on a cross. He did so that we rise from our graves and share in his resurrection life, a life that triumphs over death.

*Our God, heaven cannot hold him, nor earth sustain
Heaven and earth shall flee away when he comes to reign
In the bleak midwinter a stable place sufficed
The Lord God incarnate, Jesus Christ.*

This holy night and this Christmastide let us share our hearts with God who shares his broken heart with us. **Amen.**