

The Christmas Story Answers This Lingering Question

Recently, I began reading the book *Christmas Is not Your Birthday* by Mike Slaughter, lead pastor of Ginghamburg Church, as a part of an Advent small group series hosted by Impact Church in Atlanta, Georgia. The five-chapter book explores the idea of shifting the focus of Christmas from a me-me-me experience to one that gives-gives-gives to those who are in need. I could run the list of great points Pastor Slaughter presents about the commercialization of Christmas, but this blog is about something much more important.

The “cleaning up of Christmas,” or as Mike Slaughter puts it, “sanitizing” Christmas takes a look at our insatiable need to recreate the Christmas story into something it was not. This idea of sanitizing Christmas runs the gamut of images, new and old: there’s this peaceful, purified nativity scene, equipped with a modestly dressed Mary, an ever-loving Joseph, and a manger, though full of animals, cleaned, sterilized, and fit for a king. What the book suggests, however, is that there was nothing clean or neat about the birth of Christ.

Just think: Mary and Joseph had traveled for days to get to Bethlehem from Nazareth—no bathing, probably limited rest, and by the time they reached Bethlehem, Mary may have been in full-blown labor! (Have you ever seen a woman in labor? There’s nothing cute about that!)

We all know the story: There was no room in the inn for them to stay so they end up in a stable where animals lived. Animals, y’all. The hay that would eventually cushion Jesus’ manger (the trough from which livestock ate their food!) was the bed for sheep and goats, horses and donkeys. It was probably also their makeshift bathroom, too.

There was nothing clean or pretty about Jesus' birth.

But we've spent centuries cleaning up this story to make it appear better than it really was. We've neatly tucked away the realities of the Christmas story, dressed it up, made it look and smell better because, I mean honestly, who wants to worship a King born in the feces of barn animals? Who wants to admit that their Savior found residence in the lowest of low places—a manger—surrounded by tired, weary parents who had spent days traveling to Bethlehem with nowhere to rest once they arrived?

So we clean it up! We dress Mary in her blue and white headdress, skin a-glow, hair perfectly coiffed. Joseph, in his humble attire, looks longingly at the baby resting in the feeding trough. We strategically place each lowly lamb and honorable horse at the feet of a pristine, babbling Messiah, pushing away the idea that someone who came to save the world in so much power and grandeur could be born in such a despicable and dishonorable way.

And let us not forget the white-washing of the Christmas story; recent news circulating about *FOX News* commentator Megyn Kelly declaring that Jesus was a white man drudges up the age-old process of blotting out the color (read: melanin-infused color) of the Jesus story. Not only have we had difficulty accepting Jesus as one who was born in the recesses of society, we've had a problem accepting Jesus, His parents, and the entire community from which he was born and lived as a people of color.

Mike Slaughter suggests that we read the Christmas story through a sanitized lens because we know what is going to happen in the end; This baby will grow up to become the Messiah, our redeemer who spends the last three years of His life as a rabble-rouser. Because we often view Jesus from the other end of calvary, it becomes easy to retell His story in a

way that is more aesthetically pleasing for us. It's easy to make the ugliness of our stories appear beautiful when we are confident that the end will be favorable; but what happens to the story when you are not as sure?

From Mary and Joseph's perspective, they were not sure how this birthing-the-Messiah thing would work out. The angel Gabriel brings this bizarre message, and though both Mary and Joseph have some hesitation over it (depending on which of the Gospels you're reading), they accept the Word of the Lord which results in them facing ridicule and shame for nine months. What a challenge of their faith!

Remember: Mary and Joseph had not yet the privilege of knowing Jesus as risen savior like we do; their understanding of the birth of Jesus is not through the lens of Calvary. They were living in the moment! This experience, as I've suggested, was ugly, smelly, and quite oxymoronic considering the child being born would reign as king one day.

But, don't we do this in our lives as well? Don't we take the ugliest parts of ourselves and sanitize it, make it cleaner and more presentable to the public so that our story is better received? We shove down the shame, hide the hideous, remove the regretful to allow a more socially acceptable story to shine through—in hopes that those around us will accept us the way we've presented it.

We dress up the lies, twist how the story really went so that those around us will feel better about their own stories of fear, shame, and doubt. We reframe the circumstances behind an unexpected pregnancy to appease these social pressures of single parenthood. We reshape the story to explain how a divorce shattered a seemingly picture-perfect family. We reconstruct the tale we tell about a sudden foreclosure on a sprawling mansion after keeping up with the Jones' became just too much.

We are meticulous in repainting the picture to make it look presentable to the world. How useful could someone who has been rejected, broken, and born into a manger really be?

I think the Christmas story answers this lingering question—how useful can someone with a not-so-spectacular story be used to do great things? When we consider the realness of how Jesus was born, it allows for us to take a step back and consider the power of His birth. Jesus' birth story was not one of pristine privilege or dressed up dramatics. It was of some young and in-love folks agreeing to say “yes” to something beyond their understanding. It was a total commitment to follow through on their beliefs despite facing ridicule and having to birth their promise on top of hay full of animal feces. And despite all of those not-so-pleasurable things, Jesus' story lives on in the annals of history. And ours will too.

What stories have you sanitized to make others (or even yourself) feel better about? This Christmas, consider removing the rose-tinted glasses from your story—share it! I'm challenging myself to be and remain transparent, to tell my story as-is, no cleaning it up. The Christmas story is much more than gift giving and receiving—it is an opportunity for us to dig deeper into the realities of our story and use them to share the miracles in our own lives!

*Reprinted with permission from . **Alisha L. Gordon** is a writer, social media maven, and published author. A second year student at The Candler School of Theology at Emory University, Alisha's work has focused on fusing faith and culture together to help people better understand how our faith can help shape the community at large. A former high school English teacher, Alisha uses teaching to help further the discussion of building the bridge between the Church and community. She's also the creator of What the Hell Happened to Me in Seminary, a blog that chronicles the lives and transformative stories of current seminary students and graduates. Follow her*

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