

Why in the world?

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One thing I rarely hear mentioned about the Nativity is just how messy the whole thing must have been. Birth is messy in the first place. Blood, sweat and tears are all part of the process. But add to that a few additional factors. How many days had Mary and Joseph been on the road without an opportunity to freshen up? Were Mary's robes covered in donkey hair? Were Joseph's feet caked with dirt from the road? And imagine the delivery room — some sort of shed or cave used to shelter and feed animals. Bring to mind that whole spectrum of odors. I've never seen a nativity set that includes real poop! When was the bedding last mucked out? And every type of livestock has its own special set of odors — add to our palate of smells wet sheep, farty cows and goat breath.

This was the world God chose for the incarnation.

This was where Christ first made his home among us.

*And this is the world that God continues to choose —
the one that Christ continues to call home.*

Jesus did not come just to the poor or among the poor — Jesus was poor. His parents couldn't afford the required sacrifice when they took him for his dedication, so they brought the cheapest acceptable alternative instead. He was a member of the lowest class in an occupied country, an illegitimate child who within his first few years also became a political refugee. The puppet government propped up by occupying forces regarded him as a threat to its power — perhaps they had heard of his mother's song about the poor being raised up and the mighty being brought low.

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And what of these bodies? These fragile, smelly sacks of mostly water? The God of the universe was a baby — confined to one of the most fragile (and occasionally smelly) bodies of them all. Susceptible to disease, breakage and decay. Christ became body — became flesh, became human, became one of us — and get this — Christ *is still Jesus*. The ascension isn't just some mystical expression of Christ abandoning the world to rejoin the mystical, non-physical union of the Trinity. Jesus was resurrected and then ascended in body — and now shares his body with all of us. God still chooses the human body. God chooses *our* human bodies.

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And yet, in that dark night, there was the warmth of shelter. There was the sky above with stars unobscured by city lights. There was a world of fields and trees and oceans and mountains. There were incredible civilizations that had already built wonders, with more wonders to come. There were already pyramids in Africa and in the Americas. There was great literature in Europe and the far East. Philosophers and religious scholars devised ways of understanding the world. Jesus' own culture held a wealth of prose and poetry, historical and mystical. There was sculpture and

architecture that would last millennia and complex systems of music that we can only imagine today. This was, and is, a world of remarkable beauty — with handiwork both human and divine.

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And Jesus came to a mother who sang him songs of justice and peace — who taught him about the year of God’s favor, of release for the captive and the healing of the sick. He came to a father who trusted his dreams and followed the footsteps of angels. His arrival was not noticed by the proper people, but poor shepherds and sorcerers from another land brought homage. He came into a faith that formed him with a heart for the oppressed and a warning word for the wealthy. His faith formed his understanding of a loving God, the God of Shalom, of justice, of peace. This faith gave him Psalms that he sang throughout his life and that sustained him in his last hours.

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Let us then love the world, for God so loves the world.

The story of humanity is the history of God’s love for us — love that creates, love that shapes and guides. Love that continually invites an answer. Inexplicable love — the affection of the creator for the created, but without claiming the privilege of power. God

did not say, “I love you so I will fix you,” but “I love you so I will live with you.” Why would anyone do this but for love? Absolute, unadulterated love for the world, for the mess of it, the depth of it, the sensory explosion of life from its beginning to its ending, from its dying to its rising.

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