

If you had been listening to the words of the prophet Isaiah, your expectations were probably pretty high.

The prophet Isaiah spoke about a light that would come to people who had been living in deep darkness. And this light would reveal God's glory not just to the people who were near, but to people everywhere, to all the nations of the world. This would be a shoot, coming out of the stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of King David, who was considered to be the greatest king in the history of the people of Israel. So, this light that was coming would be in the family line of Jesse and of King David, and would bring greatness to God's people. And, the prophet says, this one, who is the light from God, this one will have authority, and be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, and Prince of Peace. This one will be filled with righteousness and faithfulness. This one will have the Spirit of God resting upon him, giving him wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. This one will bring good news and salvation, and will do things so wonderful that it will be like rivers flowing through a dry desert, and will bring peace to the whole earth.

So, if you had been paying attention to Isaiah's prophecy, you would probably have been prepared to hear about a birth of someone super important, someone who would be born to very important people who lived in a very important place.

But that is not what the gospel of Luke gives us.

The gospel of Luke tells us that an angel came to a Jewish peasant woman, to tell her that she was going to give birth to the son of God, this one who would be the Light of the World. She may have seemed like an unlikely choice to have this baby, because she was an unimportant woman from a tiny, middle-of-nowhere town, and she wasn't even married yet. But she said yes to the angel, and so Mary went with Joseph to Bethlehem, where she gave birth to baby Jesus, and laid him in a manger. And the gospel of Luke goes on to tell us that angels then appeared to shepherds who were

in the fields, watching their sheep. So those angels guided the shepherds, and they rushed to see this important little baby.

And often when we see images of this scene, of Jesus in the manger, with Mary and Joseph and shepherds and angels and animals and sometimes wise men as well, those images look carefully posed and immaculately tidy. It reminds me of the joke about Leonardo Da Vinci's painting of the Last Supper. Jesus and his disciples go to the upper room and say, "Table for 26, please," and the host says, "but there are only 13 of you," and the disciples say, "yes, but we're all going to sit on the same side of the table." It makes for a beautiful picture, but there's no way it looked like that for real. Our nativity scenes are usually like this. They often have a very cleaned up image of this story, with animals that look like they have just been scrubbed clean, shepherds who look like they just came from the barber shop instead of from their fields and pastures, and Mary looking way more polished than any woman who has just given birth has ever looked in real life.

But those images are likely far from reality.

The Gospel of John tells us that Jesus was the Word of God, the True Light, and that when he was born on that first Christmas, the Light had come into the world. The Word of God became flesh and lived among us. When Jesus was born, God knew what it was like to live in a human body. Jesus wasn't God wearing a "human suit," so that God looked human. In the person of Jesus, God BECAME human, which means that Jesus knew what it felt like to have a human body, to feel the itchiness of the hay underneath him in the manger, to feel pangs in his stomach when he was hungry, to sometimes have trouble sitting still. Jesus knew the feeling of pain when he tripped and scraped his knee as a child, the feeling of joy in his heart when he saw a scene of breathtaking beauty in the world, and the feeling of disappointment in his gut when his disciples denied him. Jesus knew what it was like to taste the most delicious foods, and to smell the most disgusting smells, and to feel the most intense feelings.

This story of the birth of Jesus carries with it wonderful hope and a wonderful challenge. It means that Jesus was born to real parents in an out-of-the-way place, and he lived in a real human

body, with all the challenges that come with that. And this can bring us wonderful hope, because that means that Jesus comes to us, whoever we are and wherever we are. When we feel discouraged or overwhelmed, when we feel hyper and can't sit still, when we feel so excited that we can't stop from shouting, Jesus knows what that feels like. Sometimes we might feel like we need to present our lives like a cleaned-up nativity painting, because we wonder if who we really are, is actually good enough for Jesus. But the Christmas story shows us that Jesus is not afraid to enter into human life as it really is, with all of the messiness, sin, pain, brokenness, and sorrow. And that can bring us wonderful hope— knowing that no matter what, Jesus is not afraid to be with us, and to become one of us, just as we are.

And this Christmas story can also bring with it a wonderful challenge. Because the Christmas story shows us that God didn't come to earth as a powerful person in a wealthy and powerful family, born in a powerful city where he would have extravagant riches at his fingertips. God came to earth as the baby Jesus, who was born to lowly people, in an out-of-the-way place, surrounded by animals instead of servants. Jesus' birth was revealed first to unexpected people, the shepherds, who were some of the lowliest and least powerful people in that society. And so the Christmas story challenges us to look for God in unexpected places, to look for God at work in unexpected ways, and to look for God speaking and acting through unexpected people.

When we feel like we have our stuff together and things are going well, the story of Jesus' birth challenges us to find God among those who don't have their stuff together. And when we don't feel like we have our stuff together at all, the story of Jesus' birth reminds us that God came to earth to be among people just like us, and to be someone just like us.

May the comfort and the challenge of the Christmas story follow you throughout this year.

Amen!