

“No Crib for a Bed”

A Christmas Eve Meditation
from the Pulpit of
First Presbyterian Church, Champaign
The Communion & Candle Light Service, 8:00
Matt Matthews

Sondra stood on the front lawn with her arms crossed tightly over her chest surveying the house she and her husband of 50-years so loved and raised their kids in. The lights hung from the gutter across that long porch. Electric candles glowed in the windows. The wreath was on the door. It was her first Christmas without him, and she wasn't sure she could do it, wasn't sure she wanted to. But it was Christmas Eve, and, like it or not, it appeared she had no choice.

The grown kids and their families had piled home from the train station and airport thanks to Uber. They filled the four-bedroom house with sleeping bags in the basement, coats on every rack and chairback, presents stacked under the tree, and the kind of loud effervescence that bubbles-over whenever a house is full—in this case, with three middle-aged children, a first wife, a second wife, an amiable partner, nine school-aged children, and a guest-cat, not to mention the curmudgeonly resident-cat named Willie Mays.

The problem that seized everyone's attention this late afternoon was getting the brand-new king-sized mattress into the house and upstairs to the main bedroom. Sondra had saved fifty bucks by not having the truck driver and his crew haul it upstairs themselves. Denuded from its box, it leaned on a post on the porch, looking as out of place as Sondra felt this year.

The group had made several attempts to wrestle it indoors, but the thing had no handles and the quilted, shiny cover was slick and impossible to grasp. It weighed as much as a Volkswagon. Susan pulled her back pushing it and Chad somehow twisted his shoulder. These academics and bureaucrats we're gifted at no kinetic activity that didn't involve golf swings or typing. Somebody emerged from the garage with ropes, but nobody could figure out a way to tie the thing up that would help. Michael, an adjunct philosopher at Cal

Tech said that with every problem there was an opportunity. He suggested breaking into the eggnog.

“Mom won’t have an opportunity to sleep unless we get this beast upstairs,” said one of the wives. “What we need is more muscle.”

Chad jogged next door and recruited the neighbor’s three sons, home from the University. Everyone leaned into the work once more and with shouts and much commotion got the thing halfway up the stairs before it slipped free, careened down the slick wooden steps, sailed out the front door, and knocked Sondra off the porch onto the sidewalk.

“Meemaw!” somebody shouted. Grandkids gathered round, some beginning to cry. Everyone rushed to her, forming a huddle of concern, while somebody dialed 911. “We’ve killed her,” one of the kids screamed. “We’ve killed her for sure.” Willie Mays plunked himself nonchalantly onto her chest, and Sondra’s first sign of life was to fold her arm over her cat and draw him close to her chin.

“There, there,” she said without opening her eyes. “I think I’m going to survive.”

The cat meowed with arrogant satisfaction.

The fire truck arrived a full three-minutes before the ambulance and after she caught her breath and sat up, she insisted these strong, young firefighters get that mattress into the house, and onto the waiting bed-frame in the bedroom at the top of the stairs. Without a moment of difficulty, they did as Sondra had ordered.

The EMS agreed with her that no bones appeared to be broken, but that her blood pressure was slightly elevated.

“Your blood pressure would be high, too,” she said, “if you were surrounded by a family as mechanically incompetent as mine. I love them, I love them,” she added, “but they can’t do one practical thing with their bare hands. Why, *my Johnnie*—”

Everyone went silent.

She swallowed hard.

This was the first moment this Christmas that his name had been uttered out loud.

“If *my Johnnie* were here, he’d a organized everybody and supervised the whole affair. He could do just about anything.”

And that was true, but he wasn’t here. Her kids, teary at the mention of their father’s name, helped Sondra off the sidewalk into her chair in the living room.

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The family had missed the early Christmas Eve service at the church. But there was still time to catch the late service, and Sondra insisted that if anyone was going to sleep in her house that night, they’d all have to make it to the service. She sat with her kids in the living room. The grandkids were watching a movie in the basement, and the spouses were making sounds in the kitchen that resembled cooking, though they were best known for take-out.

“I want to go to services tonight,” Sondra lied. “I do. But I just can’t fit it into my brain this year—all those Christmas people, all those shiny faces, all my friends needing to hug my neck and telling me they miss Johnny, too. I can’t,” she said. “I want to, but I just can’t.”

Her kids nodded.

“We can’t go without you,” Chad offered.

“Oh, yes, you can,” Sondra said, waving her hands. “I want you to go and sit in our pew. Show up and tell everybody ‘Hi.’ They raised you, after all.”

Chad explained that his new wife was a lapsed Lutheran who didn’t believe any more, and their kids hadn’t really been raised in the faith. Church, he said, kind of gets in the way of the holiday, all that tithing and guilt and talk about commandments.

“You can believe for just one night,” Sondra said. “Let’s just see where that gets you. And Church doesn’t get in the way of the holiday. That’s pure nonsense, and you know it; it’s the other way around.”

Sondra leaned forward in her recliner. “Look, I need to be alone tonight, pure and simple. If I’m going to make it through this weekend—and I will—I need to be alone for just one hour on Christmas Eve.”

“*One hour*,” Chad protested. “We could be gone for several hours. Let’s all take a pass this year.” Chad was the youngest and could get away with anything. “And these services are never short, Ma. Preachers get so wound up. The preaching itself could last for *days*.”

“We’re Presbyterians,” Sondra said, suppressing a giggle. “And Presbyterians seldom get wound up, dear, you know that. Give me tonight by myself. Call it your Christmas present to me. *Please*.”

After a quick dinner of the Brunswick Stew that Sondra had made the day before, her family wrapped up in coats and scarves and gathered on the porch for a family photo. They each kissed Sondra goodbye and began their single-file march down the sidewalk to the church several blocks away.

“Call the Coast Guard if we aren’t home by midnight,” Chad told his mother.

“Oh, you’ll be home by 9:30, young man,” she said. “I love you.”

“Love you, too, Ma.” He bounded down the steps to catch up with the rest of the family.

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When Sondra shut the door and looked at the empty living room, she broke into unexpected tears. Her big house was empty, so empty. Maybe she had made a mistake. Maybe she should have gone with them. Maybe she didn’t need to be alone, after all. But she had made her proverbial bed, and now she had to lie on it.

Johnny made her promise when he was dying that she buy the most expensive mattress in the store after he was gone. They kept meaning to replace their old mattress and never got around to it.

Baby Jesus slept in a manger when he was born. But where did Mary and Joseph sleep, Sondra wondered? Certainly not on a king-sized mattress, that's for sure.

Sondra threw another log on the fire. She stood at the mantle examining the old nativity she pulled out of the attic out every year. It belonged to Johnny's parents. "Away in a manger," she said aloud. "No crib for a bed."

She pondered the scene. It was a scandal, of course. A manger? A stable?

Millionaires are buying tickets on space rockets and just about everyone walks around with a \$600 cell phone in their back pocket. A lot has changed since Sondra grew up in a blue-collar household. Did God know what God was doing? A child born in a cattle stall because the hotels were booked?

This incarnation thing could have gone down in a more reasonable way, she thought, but this was, apparently, what God had in mind. And why not? When had God ever been predictable? The God of the Bible was a God of unexpected surprises.

Sondra sat heavily on the couch and pondered the nativity sets sitting on the piano. She and Johnny had gone on a spree some years ago and bought every nativity their local *Ten Thousand Villages* store had in stock. She had one carved in olive wood from the West Bank, soap stone from India, discarded bullet casings from Liberia, twisted wire from Egypt, glass beads from Bangladesh.

What Sondra saw when she looked at these nativity sets was a world of hurt. Mary would have been sore from bearing a son in the out of doors. And they'd not go home to a middle-class life and a safe nursery for their son. No, they'd escape from Herod's genocide to Egypt as refugees on the run. And on the run for what? For just being born, for daring to shine a little light in the dark?

It was this pain of the story that Sondra pondered, the hard part of good news, all the wrongs then and now that needed righting. They would return from exile, and Jesus would grow up among his own people, but his own people would not receive him for who and for what he was. Sondra knew this is the very thing that breaks a mother's heart, and she felt sorry for Mary. Poor Mary. Poor Joseph, for that matter. Poor Jesus. This poor family faced a world of heartbreak.

It was the pain that Sondra saw in each nativity. And the poverty. And the isolation of this impromptu family. Shepherds. Cows. Light from a star. A baby.

That family had so much in store for them, so many dangerous roads and so many valleys filled with worry and woe and with the very shadow of death, itself.

But her nativity sets from around the world didn't point to exile, and that manger didn't look anything like a crown of thorns. No, it was a quiet scene that has brought the world to its knees for millennia. And Sondra allowed herself to be present to that scene, to smell the hay and the heat of animals breathing, and the cooing of a baby. Silent night, indeed. Holy night. All is calm. All is bright. She allowed herself to take it in. Round yon virgin mother and child. Holy infant so tender and mild. Sleep in heavenly peace.

But Sondra wasn't ready for sleep. She hadn't slept well since Johnny stopped sleeping next to her—first, when he was relegated to the hospital bed in the den downstairs, and now that he was gone. She couldn't sleep without him.

What did God have in store for her life? Where would the journey take her? Would she end up living with one of the kids? She couldn't imagine living in Southern California. Earthquakes and freeways and year-round perfect weather drives people crazy. What was she supposed to do with this house? How was she going to make it without Johnny? Cooking for two was difficult enough, but for one? The *Three Dog Night* were right: One is the loneliest number.

Maybe she'd find her stride without him, without her husband who made her laugh, who bragged on her cooking, who fell asleep during the

movies, and yelled at the television at the football and baseball games in front of which he'd camp on Saturday afternoons. Maybe things would be fine. Maybe she should be happy again, really happy, genuinely happy. Maybe she'd manage the symphony tickets without him, manage without his snoring, actually get some rest on that brand-new mattress upstairs. Maybe her future held danger or pain. Maybe her loss would swallow her up; maybe it wouldn't. There were so many mundane and terrifying possibilities.

Dare she hope for the best?

Why not? she thought. Why not hope? It seemed an audacious thing to do. She was not brave, but she might risk being audacious.

Isn't that one of the things the manger reminds us of? God believes in the world and has plans to use us and heal us and walk with us? Wasn't that the point? And how could we walk with others, like we were called to do, if we stayed inside? And how could God's light in us shine if we kept the curtains drawn?

So, yes, her head knew that she could have hope. Why not? It made intellectual sense, even if her emotions hadn't caught up yet. She allowed for the possibility of hope, even if she didn't feel very much hope at this moment. This was a dark time, yes, but she'd been through dark times before. God's light has a way of always showing the way. So, yes, she decided she could hope for the best. She could trust God. This seemed not only reasonable, but, in actual fact, the only alternative.

And she decided she didn't need to have every one of her tomorrows figured out. Sondra didn't need to figure out the future and whatever it might or might not bring. Instead, she had to find a way to be present in the now.

The nativity might be a good place to begin, she thought. At the manger. So, she tried to soak it up, this manger scene. Of course, it wouldn't last. Circumstances would chase that family away, and that little baby would grow up. But for now, she allowed herself to step into the scene. To smell the hay, to hear the baby make baby-sounds. She imagined the rustle of angel-wing and she allowed herself to be surrounded by that moment of fulfillment and joy even if, to be completely truthful, she didn't feel an iota of either one, neither

fulfillment nor joy. She allowed, though, for the possibility of hope and light and even fulfillment and joy.

Her tears flowed easily now. She hurt. She missed Johnny so much, she hurt. But it was a good hurt. It's true: It is better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all. Random poetry, hymn-lyrics, thoughts of the manger, and a million holiday clichés swirled down like a wet snow, or up and up like sparks from a fire. Had she gotten stuck in a Hallmark movie? Nevertheless, it was, indeed true: *How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.*

She tried not to be worried about the future or stuck in the past, but faithful to the moment. To *this* moment. You can't take life in big chunks, she knew that. Nobody knows what tomorrow holds. The trick is claiming the moment. Being here, in the now, with your tears, and your cat, in your empty house, surrounded by nativity sets with everyone's eyes gazing at a baby in a manger.

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Willie Mays jumped on her lap and broke her train of thought. Soon the kids would pile through the door. In a minute, she'd get up and make a pot of cocoa with real cream. Who's lactose intolerant on Christmas Eve? She had time to get a few pans of sugar cookies into the oven. And there was the eggnog. It was pretty now—the fire, the colored Christmas lights, the warmth of this room set in the middle of a bleak midwinter on the Illinois prairie. Her Johnny was gone, but he wasn't gone. Her pastor called it the Communion of Saints. Johnny was here and not here. Both. And. There was a spiritual dimension we see only at the edges. A mystery.

Everybody has to leave the manger sooner or later, but for now, for one moment more, she'd allow herself to linger. She'd gather a little more peace from this enduring scene, a little more strength and courage before she set out to the kitchen through the vast, unfamiliar regions of her new life.

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