

The Intercultural Nativity Scene

by Steve Willey

An Old Lens for a New World

If you see the world through blue-tinted glasses, everything looks blue. Through red lenses, you see a wonderland of red.

Change the lens, and you see the world in a new light. Ancient truths—always present but hidden by familiar habits of looking at the world—burst forth with the power of divine revelation.

So it is when we read our scriptures through an “intercultural lens.” Old stories become new. Jesus, and the good news he embodies, comes alive in fresh ways. God’s call to the church issues in new ministry and mission.



Photo courtesy of Sam Ocampo

A Timely Example

The familiar Christmas crèche is a lens that helps us to see God’s vision for the world.

Beloved by countless generations of Christians, the annual ritual of setting up the Christmas crèche is an ancient tradition repopularized in 1223 by St. Francis of Assisi in the Italian village of Greccio. Knowing that the chapel would be unable to hold all those expected for the Christmas service, Francis found a small cave on the outskirts of the town and created a life-sized nativity scene using real animals. Something of the villagers’ delight that Christmas day is felt even now as each figurine is unwrapped from its bed of tissue paper and settled into its appointed place.

We know full well that the magi appear only in the Gospel of Matthew, the shepherds only in Luke, and an angel hovering above the birthplace in neither. We also know that Matthew’s story has the infant Jesus born in a house, while Luke says the Holy Family’s first address was a stable. In a strictly academic frame of mind, these differences are important. Each version of the Christmas story is meticulously crafted, and much of importance resides in its details.

But in the darkened evenings of Advent and the quiet days of the Christmas season, our academic mind acknowledges that it cannot keep apart what spiritual devotion and heart’s delight wish to be united. So we arrange figurines of shepherds and camels, magi and sheep, angels and cattle into a wonder-struck congregation gathered around Mary and Joseph and the babe lying in a manger.

Pilgrims and Border-Crossers

It is fitting that, to create a manger scene, we must transport figures across the boundaries separating one New Testament gospel from another. After all, as both Luke and Matthew attest, all the creatures gathered around the Christ child have crossed over significant borders. Some of those borders are geographical; some are cultural.

1. Mary, Joseph, and their donkey cross over from Galilee into Samaria, and from there into Judea.
2. The noble Magi and their camels make a lengthy western journey through many lands into the midst of an unfamiliar people.
3. The rough shepherds, with a lamb or two, leave behind the rural hillsides for the groomed streets of Bethlehem.
4. The holy angels traverse the celestial boundary separating heaven and earth.

Why have they left their familiar homes and risked the journey to a destination of manure and mystery? To greet Jesus upon his arrival at the end of one journey and the beginning of another.

To bear witness as he crosses the boundary from being a human fetus to being a baby, and from being the disembodied divine Word, to being Emmanuel, which means “God with us” (John 1:1-5).

An Intercultural Circle

The stable space God creates for the Christ child is radically diverse space, and the human community God chooses to welcome and embrace the Truly Human One is an intercultural community. Jesus is the centre of this diverse circle. This is why we turn all the figurines of our crèche so they face the babe lying in the hay. Everyone is attentive to him. Eyes are focused on him and ears are attuned to his cry.

As the glow that warms and enlightens, Emmanuel unites the diverse community of worshippers not through a forced uniformity but through the gift of new, deep relationship.

The Bethlehem scene that we freeze in our crèches for a few weeks of wonder actually exists for only a moment in the biblical narrative. It’s a transforming vision to behold, however, and one that is fully integrated into the larger biblical Story of God’s redeeming and liberating love.

Between the Alpha and the Omega

Harkening to the beginning of days, the nativity tableau evokes Eden before the Fall. Bethlehem witnesses a moment of paradise regained where all God’s creatures dwell in harmony: the four-legged, the two-legged, those with wings both angelic and avian. The three rich magi and the poor shepherds kneel side by side in a startling truce between wolves and lambs. Together they cradle the vulnerable Christ child with their devotion.

Those among them who in other times have been comfortable in the courts of tyrants make a pact to disobey the snake, Herod, who will soon appear on the scene hissing lies and making smooth the way for death. In this moment of nativity, Emmanuel is sovereign. God is with us, and we are drawn home to Eden.

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The nativity tableau also hearkens forward to the end of days. As evoked in the Revelation to John, the Day of Consummation will be a day when the slithering beasts of death will be conquered by God's irresistible desire to create a new heaven and a new earth. The universe itself will be a manger:

See, the home of God is among mortals. [God] will dwell with them; and they will be [God's] peoples, and God...will be with them. *Rev. 21: 3*

Just as Mary and Joseph came from the hinterland of Nazareth, and the shepherds came down from hidden valleys and hills, and the kings came from far away lands, the New Day of John's dreaming describes

a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb...saying, 'Salvation belongs to our God!' *Rev. 7:9-10*

As the angels came from heaven to rejoice at the coming of Emmanuel, so in John's vision, "all the angels stood around the throne and...fell on their faces and worshipped God, singing, 'Amen!'" (Rev. 7:11-12) The lowing of cattle once greeted the Christ child, and now we witness,

every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and in the sea,
and all that is in them, singing,
'To the one seated on the throne and to the Lamb
be blessing and honour and glory and might
forever and ever!' *Rev. 5:13*

Back to the Future

Is the allure of the Christmas crèche exerts any wonder? It expresses not only our deepest yearning for God, but our most profound hope for a world at rest where there is peace between its diverse peoples, and harmony among the species.

Through an intercultural lens we see afresh God's originating vision. Our vocation as the church born of that vision, is to embody it and, thereby, bear faithful witness to God made known in Bethlehem, Eden, and the New Jerusalem.