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St. Anne's Episcopal Church, Warsaw  
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Lectionary Year A: Luke 2:1-20

We've done it thousands of times -- scrolled through extraordinary amounts of data...or social media posts, in particular...almost involuntarily, perhaps doing our best to avoid looking at the stuff we might find troublesome. Then, after what seems like an eternity wasted on essentially intellectual junk food, we find a nugget of information or insight that really impresses us. We might then be spurred on to further reading or even (gasp!) changing our behavior or belief.

Many of you are aware of my hobby of record collecting, which has gotten me down countless rabbit holes of searching for particular artists and titles. In the old days, I used to spend hours standing in record stores flipping through LPs and 45s looking not only for something I knew I'd enjoy but also for something in good condition and at a reasonable price. Today, things have changed since I visit the "virtual" record store now more than the brick-and-mortar record store. But, in many ways, the experience is the same; I'm still flipping through a lot of (basically) junk in search of a treasure.

And you've likely had the experience of shopping for clothes, where you go through rack after rack and finding every size but the one you're looking for. Of course, you can get the exact size if you want it, but alas, you'll have to pay full retail price, and no one in his or her right mind would want to do that, so your search continues. In the age of Amazon, I've known of people who will order, say, a dozen items sight unseen apart from an image on the website, try them on, keep the one or two that fit right and/or look decent, and return

the rest. Think of how much additional shipping and handling that creates -- seems a bit wasteful if you ask me!

Somehow, the idea of scrolling through, flipping through, or sifting through all kinds of stuff that is disagreeable, undesirable, too expensive, or ill-fitting in search of something that's "right" seems like an extraordinary waste of time in general. But we're pretty much left with that reality because it doesn't make sense for us -- and it may even be unwise or unsafe -- to settle for the disagreeable, undesirable, too expensive, or ill-fitting. Recently, AT&T has been running advertisements with the tag line "just okay is not okay," my favorite of which involves a multinational merger between (presumably) an American corporation and a Dutch corporation. The Americans have a Dutch translator with them who claims that his Dutch is "okay." They want him to convey that they're flexible, but that they really need this merger. So the translator says, in Dutch, "This man is very bendy," and, "He says he needs a hug."

Then, the Dutch fellow hugs the American, and the translator, in delight, comments, "It's happening!"

But, lest we all turn into Goldilocks, we also cannot afford refusing to settle for good enough when just right is out of reach. I'd venture to propose, though, that good enough is usually better than "okay."

It's easy to look at Mary and Joseph in the Christmas story from Luke and see some mighty weary folks; after all, their journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was approximately ninety miles, without the aid of modern means of transportation. (That kind of puts a "grueling" search for the right size pants in perspective, doesn't it?) And even at the end of their journey, they had to settle for less-than-opulent accommodations. From there, we receive one of the most widely-

recognized pieces of Christian iconography -- the Nativity scene -- consisting of the Bethlehem stable, Mary and Joseph, and the baby Jesus in the manger. To the horror of present-day public health officials and advocates, farm animals are nearby, but yet not disrupting the scene in any significant way.

Where many preachers of the Christmas story get derailed is in conjecture around why Mary and Joseph ended up in a stable in the first place. They will point fingers at the heartless innkeepers who turn away these weary travelers, one of whom happens to be very pregnant on top of it all. The late, great Roman Catholic biblical scholar Raymond Brown offers some fine counterpoint to everyone who's eager to pounce on the innkeeper; he writes, "Luke is interested in the symbolism of the manger, and the lack of room in the lodgings may be no more than a vague surmise in order to explain the mention of a manger." Brown writes further, "This manger is not a sign of poverty but is probably meant to evoke God's complaint against Israel in Isaiah 1:3: 'The ox knows its owner and the donkey knows the manger of its lord; but Israel has not known me, and my people have not understood me'" (Christ in the Gospels of the Liturgical Year, p. 116).

How fitting it is, then, to have God Incarnate in the manger -- no longer does only the donkey know the manger, Israel can now know God through the One who is in the manger. Or, as Raymond Brown puts it, "God's people have begun to know the manger of the Lord" (p. 116). Fittingly, the angel says to the shepherds, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). The fact that this detail is repeated indicates the significance of the very piece of equipment in which the baby Jesus is to be found. Moreover, the longstanding alienation of God's people from their God is about to come to an end. The manger of the Lord is a key instrument in accomplishing that.

Understood this way, God's people, prior to Christ's birth, were never quite "right" with God. They were prone to misunderstanding and fruitless searches; imagine, if you will, not being able to find the right size pants after a few thousand years. But even though God didn't seem to get through to his people, he never gave up; in spite of their unfaithfulness and idolatry, he persisted. Furthermore, he reversed the direction of things; instead of having his people continue to search for him, he found his people and met them where they were. You see, in scrolling through stuff online, or in flipping through LPs and 45s at the record store, or in riffling through clothes on the rack at Macy's, that thing you're looking for never finds you, you always find it.

That isn't the case with God, however. God finds you in the revelation of his Son, Jesus Christ. Jesus is God's way of coming to you -- and to everyone -- to walk with and be among his people so they might respond in faithfulness and trust.

But don't we have to look a little bit? Well, remember the angel's direction to the shepherds -- look for the child in the manger (and there probably aren't many children in mangers in Bethlehem). In our case, the directions are even simpler; look at what is before us right now in Word and Sacrament. Christ is coming to us in this service, offering us God's grace in his healing and reconciling promise and in the Body and Blood that he both gave and shed for the forgiveness of our sin. Christ is ready to meet you here as he met the shepherds who "went with haste" (Luke 2:16) to Bethlehem. There, the manger was the place where they could know God. For us, the manger and infant Jesus aren't literally "here," but through the Word preached and the Sacrament administered, Jesus is present with us now regardless.

The shepherds proceed from the manger to do one more important thing; in the

Gospel, we read, "When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child..." (Luke 2:17). One could say that they were the first evangelists -- the first to proclaim the good news of Jesus. Let's take a cue from them and announce the Savior's birth, in song, in speech, and in gesture, that others might know the joy that arrives in the manger. Furthermore, as we see our Lord coming to us tonight, let us be reminded -- and remind others -- that this good news rests, above all, not in finding but in being found by a God who unceasingly reaches out to us.

Thankfully, we don't have to scroll through extraordinary amounts of data or social media posts to find that nugget of information or insight, we don't have to flip through hundreds of LPs and 45s to find something we'd actually want to listen to, and we don't have to riffle through every item on the clothes racks to find something that fits...because, in Christ, such fruitless searches are ended by someone who finds us. That "someone" accepts us as we are, whether we "fit" or not, and saves us from our sin. The Savior's birth that we celebrate tonight lets us know our God in the manger, and calls us to make him known in song, in speech, and in gesture. Sing his praise. Tell the good news. Reach out in love. The search is over, for you have been found!

Amen.