

“What’s Next?”
 Anna Pinckney Straight
 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
 December 24, 2017 ~ 11:00 A.M.

The Presbyterian Poet Ann Weems had it exactly right.
 She wrote:¹

If there is no cross in the manger,
 There is no Christmas.
 If the Babe doesn't become the Adult,
 There is no Bethlehem star....
 If there is no praising God's name,
 There are no angels singing.
 If there is no spirit of alleluia,
 There are no shepherds watching.
 If there is no standing up, no speaking out, no risk,
 There is no Herod, no flight into Egypt.
 If there is no room in our inn,
 Then "Merry Christmas" mocks the Christ Child,
 And the Holy Family is just a holiday card,...
 If we cannot go now even unto Golgotha,
 There is no Christmas in us....

Ann Weems is exactly right. What makes Christmas significant is who Jesus will become.
 That God took on flesh and lived in our midst.

To point to God.
 To live, unfailingly, a life that shows God’s love and forgiveness.
 To proclaim, in word and deed, that we are loved, beloved children of God.
 To challenge us to see that same beloved image of God in others too.
 To soothe the places where we are most deeply wounded.
 And to call us to live into that image of God with which we were created to be Christ’s
 disciples, welcoming the kingdom of God where there is no war, the table is big enough for
 all, and we share so that everyone would have enough.

This is all true.

But, the other night I happened to be watching TV, and while channel surfing, I happened
 upon the movie *Talladega Nights*².

¹ Ann Weems. *Kneeling In Bethlehem*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1980. Page 77.

² Talladega Nights: The Ballad of Ricky Bobby, 2006. Written by Will Farrell and Adam McKay.

I happened upon it at the very moment when Will Ferrell's character, Ricky Bobby, a winning NASCAR driver, is sitting down to dinner with his family, and he is offering the blessing.

With some pretty heavy editing (and if you have not seen it I am not recommending you go watch it), here is the essence of that scene:

Ricky Bobby: *Dear Lord Baby Jesus... We thank you so much for this bountiful harvest... I just want to take time to say thank you for my family... my two beautiful, handsome sons... Dear Lord Baby Jesus, Dear tiny infant Jesus...*

About the third time he prays to Baby Jesus, his wife, Carly Bobby, can't handle it anymore.

Carly Bobby: *You know, sweetie, Jesus did grow up, you don't always have to call him baby. It's a bit odd and off-puttin to pray to a baby.*

Ricky Bobby replies: *I like the Christmas Jesus best, and I'm saying grace. When you say grace you can pray to grown up Jesus or teenage Jesus or bearded Jesus, or whoever you want. Dear Tiny Jesus, golden fleece diapers with your tiny little fist balled up. Dear eight pound six ounce newborn infant Jesus, just a little infant, so cuddly, still omnipotent.*

Why does Ricky Bobby like Baby Jesus best? Aside from the many theological issues with his prayer, I suspect that Ricky Bobby's preference is because the baby Jesus asks nothing of him. Is silent and affirming. Never challenging or confrontational.

But, it might just be the right prayer for today. For tomorrow.

Yes. There is work to be done. And we will get to it. Jesus was lead us to it. Telling us to set aside our prejudices and open our hearts and our pocketbooks. Yes. But we aren't there yet.

And I don't know that we can get there if we jump past this part.

This part, where we learn to be. And be amazed. And struck with wonder. Considering what it was like to be told by an angel "Shazam"³ "Fear not."

The power of God with us, Emmanuel.

This prayer has been edited for the sermon...

³ In the Youth Christmas Play presented on 12/10, "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever" the angel says "Shazam"

The Baby Jesus, not a child of total affirmation as Ricky Bobby's theology might hope, but a physical manifestation of God's grace. God's mercy. God's forgiveness.

And that proof comes in the form of a baby. Not only is it okay to spend a little time in the manger at Christmas, it's exactly what we are called to do. To receive this gift of grace. This gift of being in a presence of a child. The Christ Child. To simply be, and know that that is enough. To breathe and be surrounded by the love and grace of God, the word made flesh.

A chance to reconnect with the grace that is the foundation of it all. Of us all. And simply be there.

To be aware of the glory of God without being consumed by what is yet to be.

It is almost Christmas. It is the time to go to Bethlehem and welcome life and hope. To be present there. Just there. Just with that baby, a baby born not out of guilt or struggle but of God's hope.

It's time to say a prayer to the baby Jesus. Not as way to escape the world and what is ahead, but as a way to live into it. Faithfully. Taking each step as it comes. Each step in its time.