

Reeks: Kersfeesstorie
Titel: ... The Messy Stable
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Good morning, friends. Now, let's be honest. How many of you battled with this dilemma this morning: church / cricket, church / cricket? Well, I'm glad you chose church, and we pray that God will be very close to those who chose cricket. Today is a very special day in the Christian church throughout the world. People who follow Christ see this Sunday as the beginning of Advent. Advent means coming, and it's a season in the Christian calendar when we focus upon the coming of Christ, the coming of Christ 2,000 years ago, the coming of Christ today into our lives, and as we look forward to His final coming into human history. So it's a very, very important time in the life of the Christian family.

This morning I want to take you to a very familiar passage of the Christmas story. I hope that we can look at it a little bit differently today, and that God will speak to us. If you have your bulletin, at the back there is place for some notes. There is also the reading for today which I'm going to read to you, and which is going to come up on the screens now, and it comes from Luke Chapter 2 verses four to seven.

So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and to the line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged, or engaged or betrothed, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped Him in cloths and placed him in a manger, a feeding trough for animals, placed Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

We thank God for that very familiar part of the Christmas story, and we do ask, as I was saying earlier, that somehow it may be fresh for our lives today. Friends, I wonder if you would agree with me if I were to say to you that there come moments in our lives when life gets very messy. On the outside maybe everything looks neat and tidy. You know, we look around in church and we all look neat and tidy. That's the outward appearance of our lives, but often behind the scenes, there's a lot of personal mess.

I was chatting to a young guy this week in Benoni, and he was saying to me "Trevor, this year my work life has just been so, so good, but my personal life at home is a mess." I think messiness comes with being a human being. It's part and parcel of what it means to be human. I have a dear friend who says to me, Trevor, in this world there are two kinds of people. There are those whose lives are a mess, and there are those who don't know that their life is a mess. Wherever you find human beings you will find mess.

But it's not only at a personal level that there is mess; it is also at a social level. We look back just on the journey that we've been through this year as a country, and it's been a very messy year, painfully messy, tragically messy: the mess of the textbook fiasco in Limpopo, the mess of the Marikana killings, the tragedy and the pain of that, the mess of public funds being used for private purposes, the economic mess as that terrible gap between rich and poor gets bigger and bigger and bigger. And one can go on and on and on.

I'm very conscious of mess at the moment, and it's against this background of mess that I want us today to focus in on what I'm going to call the Gospel of the Messy Stable. And I want to base everything I'm going to say upon this powerful little verse that we find in the Christmas story. Look it up. It will come up on the screen again. She wrapped Him in cloth and she placed Him in a manger because there was no



room for them in the inn. Christ is born. Listen to this. Christ is born, not in a presidential palace. Christ is born in the messiness of a stable.

And over the years that simple gospel fact has become for me a sign and a symbol of the good news that God brings into our lives at Christmas time. The good news that when God, the creator of this universe, entered this messy world, God comes to us in the messiness of a stable. God does not turn His back on the mess of this world. God does not abandon this world to its mess. God does not let go of this world. God comes to us in Jesus Christ in the mess of this world, and He comes into our mess, and this, for me, is the gospel. He comes into this mess so that He can transform it into something beautiful. He comes into the mess of my life; he wants to come into the mess of your life so that he can transform the mess into something beautiful.

I love John 3:17 where it says that God sends His Son into this world, not to condemn it, but so that through him it can be saved. God sends His Son into this world so that, through His Son, this messy world can be saved. That's the gospel, and I don't know, but for me that is very, very good news.

You know, sometimes I listen to Christian preachers and I read Christian books and I watch Christian DVDs, and sometimes I get the feeling that Jesus is only there for the neat and tidy, for those who've got it all together. And then I wonder, what about the rest of us? What about those whose lives are a relational mess, those of us who have gone through what people call a messy divorce, those of us who are in immense relationship pain? What about us? Is there a gospel of us? What about those of us who struggle with bulimia, who cut our bodies just to feel something? Is there a gospel for us in our mess? What about us who wake up sometimes in the morning and it's so dark and despairing, and we wonder mentally whether we are going to make it?

What about those of us whose lives are a financial mess, and we seem to move from one mess into another, is there a gospel for us? And the Christian gospel says there is. The God that we worship, who has come to us in Jesus Christ, came to us in the messiness of a stable, and that, for us, is a sign and a symbol that God wants to enter the mess of our lives, whatever that mess may be, and make something beautiful of it. That's the gospel of the messy stable. And just for a few moments, can I unpack that, and I pray that as I unpack it, that the spirit of God, that the spirit of Jesus Christ will speak to us today a word of good news in our mess, whatever that mess may be.

I think the first thing that this gospel does for me, and I think it can do this for all of us, is that it invites us to acknowledge our mess. We don't have to run from it. Let's acknowledge it. I was saying earlier, messiness is part of being human, and it comes into our lives through a whole lot of different doorways. Sometimes the mess is there because we've made stupid, destructive and sinful decisions. We've all done that. Paul writes in Romans 3:10, that there's no one who's righteous. There's no one who's got it all together. We've all got our issues and we all make sinful choices.

And as I say again and again to you and to myself, we are free in this world to make any decision we want. That's how God has created us. But we're not free to choose consequences. Every decision has consequences. And sometimes the mess is there because of the decisions I've made, and I need to connect the dots. If I behave or relate in a destructive pattern to those in my life, I must not be surprised if there is the relational mess.

If I make stupid financial decisions, buying things that I don't need to impress people that I don't even like, I mustn't blame anyone if I find myself in a financial mess. If I duck and dive at work, and I overpromise and under-deliver, then I've only got myself to blame for the mess I find myself in at work.

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Often messiness comes into our lives through choices that we make. And what is true personally is true for us even nationally.



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I was listening to the general secretary of Cosatu the other day, Vavi, and he was reflecting on the state of our country at the moment. And he was saying that our ruling party; and he took the initials of the party, A N C, and you know what that means, the African National Congress. And he said somehow those initials now mean something else: Absolutely No Consequences. And so we have a textbook fiasco and there are absolutely no consequences. We have Marikana and there are absolutely no consequences. But there are consequences. There are consequences, and we can feel the consequences around this beloved country of ours at the moment. Let us with ears hear and listen.

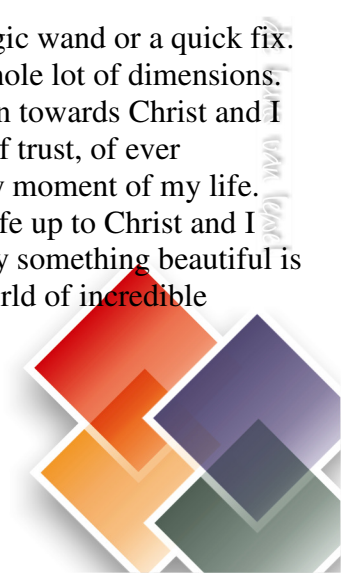
Sometimes mess comes into our lives because of what other people do and because our lives are bound up with each other. When you sin it affects me, and when I sin I affect you. And so I think of Regina, and that's not her real name, married for 30 odd years, discovers this year that she's got lung cancer. Her husband leaves her for a younger woman. She's got two children struggling with drug addiction. Her church blames her for lack of faith because she's not getting well, and she says to me, my life is a wreck. And it's not all Regina's fault. It's the decisions of those around her causing tremendous heartache and heart pain.

Sometimes mess comes into our lives simply because we live in a world that has fallen. It's imperfect. Accidents happen, tragedies devastate our lives. And you know that and I know that. But the gospel is, friends, that it's within this mess that Christ wants to meet us. That's the gospel of the messy stable, and that's what I want to say as I develop this just a little bit further. Listen carefully: Christ wants to enter this mess so that it can be transformed into something beautiful.

Have you noticed in the gospels how Jesus does this again and again and again? Has it ever struck you that the gospels are full of messy people? Jesus comes to Zacchaeus; you can read about that in Luke 19. The guy's life is a mess, flawed with deception and corruption, and Christ meets him and something beautiful is born. And he meets a woman at the well in John 4, and she's been through five marriages, and you have a sense that she's been thrown away again and again and again, and Christ meets her in that, and you sense something beautiful is born.

And then, in John 7:53, a woman is dragged into His presence, and she's been caught in the act of committing adultery, and the Jewish law states that she's got to be stoned to death, and as religious people gather around to condemn her Jesus says to her, I do not condemn you; go now and do not sin again, and you sense that she catches a glimpse of a beautiful future for herself. That's the gospel. That's the gospel of the messy stable, of this Christ who comes and meets us in our mess to transform our mess into something beautiful.

And it's not an overnight thing. It doesn't just happen like that. Jesus isn't a magic wand or a quick fix. He transforms my life as I go on a journey with him. And it's a journey with a whole lot of dimensions. It's a journey of repentance. As I turn from that which is destructive, and as I turn towards Christ and I keep doing that every day of my life, something beautiful is born. It's a journey of trust, of ever deepening trust. It's a journey of daily training as I learn to walk with Jesus every moment of my life. It's a journey in community with others. It's a journey of consent as I open my life up to Christ and I give Him consent to enter every part of my humanity. And as I go on this journey something beautiful is born in the mess, and then I and you and we can become agents of beauty in a world of incredible messiness. That's the gospel of the messy stable.



But can I say one more thing? The gospel of the messy stable encourages us to stop pretending. We don't have to pretend anymore. We don't have to pretend that we're not a mess. It's a wonderful freedom. It's almost as if in the church we've got an unwritten law: pretend. Pretend that you believe God is in charge, even if you don't believe it. Pretend that you've got everything together, even if things are falling apart. Pretend that your children are well adjusted, even though they're totally dysfunctional. And above all, pretend that you never ever sin. And so we live in this world of pretence, often, and it's very painful, because a pretend person has a pretend relationship. It's not real. It's not real, but if I can just let go of my pretence, Christ meets me in the mess.

I love the story of that guy who goes to the psychiatrist because he's suffering from severe headaches, and he can't work out the reason. The doctor asks him, "Do you smoke?" He says, "Doctor, I don't smoke." The doctor says, "Do you drink a bit too much?" He says, "Doctor, I'm a Methodist. I don't drink too much." The doctor asks "Is it a sharp, shooting pain?" He says yes. The doctor asks him, "Do you mess around with other women?" He says, "Doctor, I go to Mosaic, no, not all all, not at all. The doctor says, "Let me check one more time again. Is it a sharp, shooting pain?" The guy says, "Yes." The doctor says, "It's your halo. It's on too tight."

We can relax. We can relax, and that's not an excuse for sin, but we don't have to pretend to be better than who we are. Wouldn't it be wonderful if churches throughout this land could become communities where we don't have to pretend anymore?

So let me end. Will you catch a glimpse of the gospel of the messy stable? It reminds us of the great God, the creator of the universe, who enters this world in all its messiness, doesn't turn His back on it, doesn't throw it away, doesn't give up on it, comes in Jesus Christ into the mess, not to condemn the mess, but to save it. That's the gospel. Can we acknowledge our mess today? I don't know your mess and you don't know mine, but can we acknowledge it today, and can we allow Christ into our lives at the point of its messiness? And then, can we go on a journey with Jesus so that He can begin to make something beautiful of our lives?

We sing a song in Benoni. It's become very special to me. We don't sing it here. I'd love us to sing it one Sunday. It goes like this: "Something beautiful, something good, all my confusion he understood. All I had to offer Him was brokenness and strive, but he made something beautiful of my life." That's the gospel of the messy stable.

Let's pray together. Dear God, You surprise us. You come into this world in such an unexpected way. You come to us in a baby born in a stable. God, we thank You that You come to us in our messiness, that you sent Jesus into this world, not so that the world may be condemned, but so that through Him this world can be saved and made beautiful. Lord, will You come into the mess of our own lives today, and will You show us how, together with You, we can go on a journey of deep change and transformation, so that wherever we go, wherever we work, wherever we live, we may become agents of Your beauty and of Your change? This is our prayer, and we offer it to You, Father, in the name of Jesus, our Saviour and our Lord, and we say together, as God's people, amen, amen.

