

“Be Born in us Today Bringing Blessing”

Imagine that two of your friends have tickets to attend a Browns game at First Energy Stadium. The game is televised, and you have tuned in to the game at home. You know your friends are there in person, and you wonder if by chance you might spot them somewhere near the fifty yard line in the crowd of 80,000.

What are the odds? Then suddenly there they are! A camera pans across the crowd and settles on them long enough that you recognize them. It is an amazing moment. You shout out their names as if they can hear you. What are the odds of that? The many and the one or, in this case, the many and the two!

It’s easy to get lost in a crowd. Remember the old *Where’s Waldo?* books? They showed that it can be hard to find the one among the many. In the holy history of God and humanity known as the Bible, God is more than pretty good at picking someone out of a crowd. Four millennia ago God found a tribal chief named Abram from among all the nations and people groups on earth. God singled out this leader from the crowd and promised to bless him. Such a blessing God gave Abram that it would extend to all nations. That’s what God said, and that’s exactly what happened.

Some see that this idea of Abraham blessing the nations is fulfilled by his impact on the world’s religions. The three great world religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all called “Abrahamic religions,” each recognizing Abraham in some way as significant in its history and tradition.

For us Christians, Abraham’s impact goes much farther than that of an historical or religious figure. We believe that God blessed Abraham to establish the nation Israel and that from that nation God blessed the world with the Messiah, Jesus Christ. We believe that when God first blessed Abraham, God already had blessing the whole world in mind.

You can't miss this in the promise God gives Abraham. It is all very personal, this call of God. At the same time, it is all very universal, the one and the many. God says, ***“And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing ... in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed”*** (Genesis 12:2-3).

We live among the many. We are defined by the communities we cherish, the relationships we hold dear, the culture that shapes us. More and more, we are led to think globally. Because we hear so much about it, we care what happens on the other side of the world. But, in so many ways we can lose ourselves in our culture.

Almost a century ago already, Thornton Wilder's play *Our Town* was prophetic in recognizing how the one can get lost in the many. Wilder scripts that one of his characters, Rebecca Gibbs, recalls a letter her friend Jane Crofut had received. It was addressed to: *“Jane Crofut; The Crofut Farm; Grover's Corners; Sutton County; New Hampshire; United States of America; Continent of North America; Western Hemisphere; the Earth; the Solar System; the Universe; the Mind of God.”* As Rebecca describes that address, you begin to picture Jane Crofut becoming smaller and smaller, less and less significant.

This can be a blessing, this strong sense of the many, especially when it leads us, as in the case of the letter in *Our Town*, back to the One who has created it all, all of this community and culture of which we are a part. From the individual we move to the universe and ultimately to the Creator God.

The challenge, though, is to not lose oneself along the way. Part of that challenge is to know that God is busy working the divine plan to save the world through Jesus Christ. God has not lost sight of you in the global crowd. ***“God so loved the world”*** is true, but just as true is ***“God so loved you.”*** God has some work to do, cutting through all that comes between me and God—the stuff of families, nations and cultures—but God gets the divine mail delivered to Jane and to you.

That is the message of the call of Abraham. Yes, God is out to save the many, even the all, but God does it one by one, family by family, nation by nation. When God gets through, when the saving work of Jesus Christ takes hold of an individual, it is simply true that community is born. This new community is, of course, with God, with the church, and with the neighbor, all objects of the individual's Christian love. In other words, from the many God finds the one who in turn blesses the many. That is your story of blessing and mine.

A favorite painting of many at Christmas is Flemish Renaissance painter Pieter Bruegel's *The Census of Bethlehem*, painted in 1566 (a copy of which is in your bulletin). Like many artists before him, Bruegel places the story of Christmas Eve in his own contemporary setting, here depicting a taxing census in a bustling peasant village in the Low Countries of the Netherlands. There is plenty to see in this painting that could fill half an hour—ice skaters, snowball fights, kids sledding across the ice, the draining of a slaughtered pig's blood for sausage, a makeshift pub, a crumbling castle, a well-kept church, and a long line of taxpayers.

You have to look for her, but there in the foreground, among the bustling crowd of a Renaissance Christmas Eve, is Mary, the expectant mother of our Lord. She rides a donkey led by Joseph into Bethlehem. It's hard to make out in this copy (the original is almost 5.5 x 4 feet), but there is a cow beside her looking to the viewer as if to say, "*Please, take note. He has arrived.*" The one among many, blessed to bless many! Recall, Gabriel told Mary: "*Blessed among women are you*" (Luke 1:42).

Marked by a fresh candle each week, we have embarked on a season celebrating the birth of the One who came to save the many. In a sermon for Christmas Day, Martin Luther said, "*The Gospel does not merely teach about the history of Christ. No, it enables all who believe it to receive it as their own, which is the way the Gospel operates. Of what benefit would it be to me if Christ had been born a thousand times, and it would daily be sung into my ears in a most lovely manner, if I were never to hear that he was born for me and was to be my very own?*"

[“Sermon for Christmas Day; Luke 2:1-14,” *The Sermons of Martin Luther*, Lutherans in All Lands Press, 1906].

Much of this season will be spent doing what we do at Christmas with the people we love the most. The season of lights and carols and greens and cookies and gifts will in many ways bring its own blessings to our lives and, yes, to our culture. It will be a lovelier time as the world takes on a yuletide glow, and the message of peace on earth, goodwill toward all seems more than just a slogan. We will do it all with millions of Christians across the world, and that will be good.

That said, the good news of Christmas is also meant to be ours, one by one. God has always had a heart for the one through whom many will be blessed. So it was with Abraham. So it was with Mary. So it was with Jesus of Nazareth, and so it is with you. Christ was born for us. Christ was born for you. This Christmas may God find and bless you among the many and make you a blessing.

The last stanza of Phillips Brooks’ carol “O Little Town of Bethlehem” closes with a prayer. May it be our prayer, one and all:

*“O holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us, we pray;
Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today.
We hear the Christmas angels the great glad tidings tell;
O come to us, abide with us, our Lord Immanuel!”*

Amen.