

Listening to the story from another perspective

from the Racial Justice Advocacy Network

Growing up, I loved decorating for Christmas. The days after Thanksgiving were prime time to pull down the boxes of Christmas decorations from the closet. One of my favorite things to set up in the house was the nativity scenes.

I loved setting up nativity scenes because it connected me to the Christmas story. Setting up Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus was always done first. I noticed from a young age that not all the nativity scenes contained all the same pieces. Some had just Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. Others contained a donkey or an ox. Others shepherds and sheep. Still others magi and camels. Our largest set had dozens of pieces, including a whole band of children playing instruments with the little drummer boy. Maybe these weren't biblical, but they added a flavor to the story.

The other thing I noticed was how the different sets were decorated and how each character was portrayed. My parents explained to me that many of these sets came from different countries around the world. Some were crafted in the United States and Western Europe. I noticed in these sets the characters looked a lot like me: light colored skin, and blonde or light brown hair. They often wore expensive looking robes, even the shepherds. This was in contrast to some of the other sets. One was a hand carved set made of olive wood from Bethlehem. The set was masterfully carved, with great detail, yet the carving told a simpler story of Jesus' birth. The clothes were simpler, like what an artisan such as Joseph could afford. Whenever I pulled this set out of the box, I was re-



minded that Jesus' birth didn't happen in rural Iowa, but in Bethlehem far away. This helped me feel more connected to the global community.

We also had a few sets from Mexico. These sets were painted with vibrant colors: pinks, yellows, light blues, and bright oranges. These characters had darker skin and black hair. Mary was ornately decorated. One set from Mexico was styled after Tonala pottery. It featured abstract shapes for the individual pieces. Baby Jesus' arms were extended to make the shape of the cross. Each of these pieces had detailed designs for both the features and the clothing. These many sets came together to tell a deeper story of Jesus' birth, a story each set could not communicate by themselves.

Every year as I set up the nativity scenes in my own home, I am reminded of the rich diversity that makes up our world. Different cultures tell

the story of Jesus in different ways, using their own cultural and artistic mediums. Each scene tells a story. It's important to pay attention to that story, to recognize someone else's experience may cause them to tell the story in a different way. I think there's a lesson here for seeking racial justice. If we only see the world from our experience, we will find we have a rather limited view. What if one particular nativity scene was our only way of telling the Christmas story? We would miss out on so much! We need to hear the stories of others. As we seek racial justice and equity in our own communities, are we listening to the stories of others? Or are we dismissing their experiences before we ever hear them? In addition to listening to others' stories, it is important for us to reflect why we tell our story the way we do, so that as we listen, we are not simply comparing our experience against that of another.

At Christmas, we celebrate God becoming a human being in Jesus Christ. We get to know God more deeply through getting to know Jesus' story. The same is true as we listen to the stories of our neighbors. In this season, let us commit ourselves to listening to the stories and experiences of people who may look different from us, whose cultural practices might differ from our own. We might be challenged by what we hear. The stories may be different from our own. But through the voice of our neighbor, we may hear God's voice calling us into a new and more just future for all God's children.

— *Pastor Daniel Hanson*
Trinity Lutheran, Mason City