

A few a nights ago, I had a terrible dream. It was Christmas Eve, and instead of this lovely service we're having right now, it was chaos in here. The musicians didn't show up. The tree was dead. And a pretty little stage we had built for the children fell down on top of them in the middle of Silent Night.

And while I was trying to control all the chaos, I remembered I hadn't done any Christmas shopping for my own children; I didn't have anything for dinner; and I had forgotten to call my mother.

It was your pretty typical stress dream.

Now you may not share my particular stresses, but I bet you can all relate to feeling anxious in one way or another. You might worried about how your kids are going to behave tonight, or tomorrow when you're at some un-child-friendly party. Maybe you're feeling guilty because you've been working too much. Maybe it's financial stress, or illness, or grief that's keeping you up at night. Maybe you're just heart-sick over the pain and injustice we've seen in our world this year.

I don't know what it is for you, but in this season so obsessed with joy and happiness, the truth is that we all are carrying an awful lot on our shoulders tonight.

And I bet your Facebook posts and Christmas cards display beautiful, happy pictures, because there is so much pressure to be happy and good and all pulled together. But we all know the true stories behind those pictures.

Why do we do that? Why do we clean up the truth of our lives, instead of just being ourselves?

We've even done it to the Christmas story! The nativity scenes all look so nice on our Hallmark cards – so cute in our church buildings.

Mary always looks radiant and peaceful and refreshed, instead of what she really is – a very young woman who just gave birth ... in a barn.

Joseph is always calm and doting, while the women – the midwives who were probably there to assist with such a risky birth, well they aren't even in the picture.

There's one, clean white swaddling cloth (anyone with a newborn knows that's a joke); there's golden hay, and fluffy white sheep. Between a long labor, an over-crowded town, and a barn where animals come to do all the things animals do...the scene probably wasn't nearly as tidy as we like to make it out to be.

Why do we feel such a need to clean it all up? Birth – life – reality – it’s messy. It’s hard. It’s painful and sometimes ugly.

I wonder if we try to clean up the Christmas story for the same reason we try to pretty up our own lives up for public display.

Because maybe we’re afraid that the world knew the truth about us, that we wouldn’t really be loved or accepted. Maybe it’s pretty hard to believe that God actually loves us - just way we are.

But that’s the good news of Christmas, friends. We are not picture-perfect. We are like the dirty shepherds, just trying to herd our loud, stinky flock; just trying to make it through each dark, anxious night.

So tonight, remember, it was to *those* shepherds – the lowliest, dirtiest, most regular people – that God came and said, "Do not be afraid. I have good news – and it’s for *you*."

To us—just as we are this night – God says, "Do not be afraid. To *you* is born a savior." Do not be afraid of the things happening in the world. Do not be afraid that you aren't good enough. Do not be afraid of the future. God has come to be with us in this mess, to bring peace and hope, and to make all things new.

On this night, come as you are, and do not be afraid to place your real life in God’s loving hands, and receive the gifts of love, and forgiveness, and peace. When you feel anxious, treasure these words in your heart.

Amen.