Devotional

By: Rev. John Mullaney

Matthew 1:23

“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel, which means ‘God with us.’”

In 2006, the year our daughter Maggie was born, I was serving as an associate pastor at Vestavia Hills United Methodist Church.  As the youngest and most inexperienced associate pastor, also known as the short-straw pastor, I was enlisted to play Joseph in the church’s one night only,  live, indoor nativity.

They robed me up. The Bible bearded me. I looked more like Osama Bin Laden than Joseph Bar David.  But you work with what you’ve got.  They paired me with a lovely young mom in the congregation who brought her beautiful, little baby girl to play Jesus.  This child was angelic.

They placed us on the contemporary worship stage, and then brought in the animals. The LIVE, baby animals. They thought baby animals would be cuter.  Easier to control.

It started well…as children began to file through to see this scene. And then, slowly,

things started to break down:

The sheep had been watered too close to performance time.  If you have never heard a  lamb urinate on a plastic tarp, it is surprisingly LOUD.

The little baby donkey….the foal…the fonkey.  They got a broken fonkey. He had not learned to EEE-Ahh. He only knew how to EEEeeeeeeeeee!  That baby donkey wheezed this terrifying sound.

The calf had what can only be called epic flatulence.

And our angelic, beautiful, peaceful baby Jesus girl? Twenty minutes in she, how do I put this? She swaddled herself.  Up the back, down the legs.  She swaddled all over the place.

I looked around at this chaotic scene and I couldn’t help but think, “This is no place for a baby…thank God that’s not my baby!

This is no place for a birth.  We Purrell-ed each kid that walked through the line.

We sanitized them so they wouldn’t be contaminated by one of these disgusting animals.

This was chaos.

This was gross.

This was awkward.

This was strange.

            But this was also what we had all been waiting for. This was….Christmas. That’s what this season is all about.  It is the longing for “Emmanuel.” God with us.  God did not come to us as a some far off, removed all powerful God.  God came a baby.

In a messy manger.

This is a scandalously present God.