

Christmas Eve
Wicker Park Lutheran Church
Rev. Jason S. Glombicki
December 24, 2019

A few days after the year's longest night, we gather here. We sing. We read. We light candles. And, we do it every year. Even with the familiar story, something different always grabs my attention. This year, it is the phrase, "there was no place for them in the inn." Now, if you talked to a room of Lukean scholars (yes, there is such a thing), you'd probably get at least two interpretations of the word "inn." Some say that the word "inn" means public accommodations, like a 21st century hotel, while others say it means a relative's guest room. Now, here's the rub, either way—whether they're at a relative's home or at a public inn—who would let this pre-teen give birth like that? Why wouldn't someone say, "Please, take my room as you risk your life to give birth to your first child"? There is no way we, as good Christians who are in church on Christmas Eve, would ever let *that* happen, right?

But, the thing about this Christmas story is that the world around Mary, Joseph, and Jesus was status quo. There was, and is, no special treatment for the birth of a bastard child to a twelve-year-old girl. There was, and is, no respect for a man marrying a pregnant pre-teen with someone else's baby. No one cared how far this girl traveled, no one cared about a poor carpenter's plan for adoption, and no one cared if this child, or the mother for that matter, lived or died. Because, they, like us, live in a "first come, first serve" kind of world where you've either got to pay with your wallet or your documented reputation, and if you can't pay, then there is no room in the inn. That—that is our world.

And, I don't think I really understood the truth of that first Christmas night until I saw the creche pictured on the front page of your bulletin. You see, when I first walked into the small gallery room where it's housed, to me, the nativity scene looked gaudy and busy. My first reaction was to leave and go find some lilies or a stack of hay in the impressionists. I looked and I couldn't find the Holy Family. The angles looked like fat babies and not as the biblical messengers I knew. But, I was with someone in the gallery, so I pretended to care.

So, I looked at hundreds of figures, and then, I saw the Holy Family, below them is a marketplace with haggling peasants, people drinking, and a woman breastfeeding. Throughout the scene, there is a man sleeping, people dancing, musicians playing, meat hanging, people talking, animals roaming, and shepherds out in the fields. And, then it dawned on me, that this version of that Christmas night is much more realistic than Silent Night ever was. That night was *not* calm. It was *not* still. It *was* a bustling town filled with all the highs and lows of life. It was overcrowded. It smelled. Parents were frustrated by their children, and children were equally annoyed by their parents. People were most likely eating, laughing, giving birth, having sex, arguing, celebrating, stealing, and sharing. Someone, was, probably, being honored and another was being abused. Someone was hopeful and another was hopeless. You see, for me, the power of this piece is that it holds together the true, unadulterated, and, perhaps, more original Christmas night. The night that Jesus was born was a time where the world was not perfect; rather, it was a messed-up place. It was chaotic. It was uncertain. It was a time, well, a lot like ours.

A time, like ours, when unwed, teenaged mothers faced stigma. A time when, like ours, the government was preparing for a census. A time, like ours, when the politicians would make any deal or kill anyone to keep their power. It was a time when

the fear of the Roman military gave way to, so called, peace on earth. It was a time when people worked without living wages. A time when foreign conflicts and ecological abuses kept the markets strong and domestic life in Rome calm. It was a time, just like ours, when citizenship was more revered than one's humanity. You see, the night that Jesus was born, was at a time that isn't all that far away or long ago. Because, it was a time that is remarkably similar to tonight.

And, in that time that was eerily similar to tonight, is when God took on human form. In a night, like tonight, Jesus was born into an uncertain future. And, this messiah did not have the expected military parade to communicate his power; instead, he had the working poor from the field parade in some sheep with gifts of ticks and fleas, and foot-and-mouth disease. This anointed one did not have oil poured upon him in an ancient ritual, instead blades of hay stuck to his body with all the blood, fluids, and feces from his birth. From the very beginning, God was born in a manner that turns all our expectations upside down. And, Jesus will show us that radical generosity is the greatest power we can harness. Jesus will reveal that true leadership is servant leadership. Jesus will preach peace through non-violence. And, Jesus will challenge our religious hypocrisy that excludes, and instead, Jesus will show God's preference for the stranger.

For, our God's first visitors were the lowly, the poor, and the outcast. The ones that are different in how they look, how they love, and whom they love. The ones that don't have legal registration papers, predictable work, or light-colored skin. The ones who don't seem to conform to our systems, our norms, and our standards. It's those ones—the ones that are imperfect and don't live up to the world's standard— it's those people who are a little odd and lack that airbrushed look, people, like you and me, that our God reveals to us this night.

That is the gift we celebrate. It's not only that Jesus was born thousands of years ago, but rather, the gift is that God is born among us every single day. When we acknowledge and support the working poor with our policies or maybe, simply, a really generous tip, there, Jesus is born. When we welcome the refugee and the stranger with a curiosity and without judgment, there, Jesus is born. When we try really hard to not take out our travel frustrations on the ticket agent or the reckless drivers, there, Jesus is born. When we work towards body positivity and graciousness with our self and our loved ones, there, Jesus is born. When we experience the gift of Jesus's life-giving path to wholeness, peace, and justice, there, Jesus is born. When we begin to recognize God's presence in the everyday things of life, there, Jesus is born. And, to be clear, it's not that our actions create God's presence, but rather, God is already living among us and we are merely coming to notice God's birth in the unexpected.

So, my friends, I hope that we might recall the true Christmas. The places where the sacred and the mundane are intertwined. The Christmas where our loving God is discovered in the least likely of places, with the least likely of people, and in the moments that we least expect it. Amen.