

Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2018  
The Rev. Jedediah D. Holdorph  
Trinity Episcopal Church, Bend

Isaiah 9:2-7  
Psalm 96  
Titus 2:11-14  
Luke 2:1-20

In case you are unaware, a lot of the world celebrates Christmas without going to church.

I don't say that to you to encourage any of us to be smug. There is much about Christmas as it's celebrated in the big, wide world out there that is wonderful in its own right. Christmas trees. Holiday cheer. Twinkling lights. Ugly sweater pub crawls. Christmas concerts. Stories for the season. TV specials. Hallmark movies – well, the jury's still out on that! But some true classics for Christmas, all the same: *The Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street*; *The Muppet Christmas Carol*; *It's a Wonderful Life*; *Love, Actually*; *The Bishop's Wife*; *Die Hard*.

A lot of the world celebrates Christmas without going to church. And I kinda get it.

There is a story told – I'm sure it's true – about a conversation between a parent and a six year old about how the family planned to spend Christmas Day: 1) get up; 2) open presents; and then, 3) go to church.

“Church?! On Christmas? We're going to church on Christmas?”

“Of course,” the parent patiently explained. “Of course, that's what Christmas is all about. It's about the birth of Jesus and God coming to us.”

“I know, I know, I know ... But Christmas! Church wrecks everything!”

Well, at the risk of wrecking things for you this Christmas, let me tell you something I've been puzzling over this year. It has to do with how we tell the story of that first Christmas. And it's not even quite the way we tell it; it's more about how we imagine the story that's being told.

Think back to just about every Christmas Pageant you've ever seen. The Emperor issues a decree and Joseph is obliged to go to Bethlehem, his ancestral home. He's engaged to Mary, so he takes her along. Mary was expecting a child at the time, so she rides upon a donkey and Joseph walks along beside her. In due course, they arrive in Bethlehem, just as Mary is going into labor. Joseph frantically searches for a room in one of the local inns, but everything's booked solid. The only option offered them is a stable, so they take it! And that's where Jesus is born, all alone (save the animals there to attend his birth). And in the deep and dark night, Mary lays the baby Jesus in a manger there in that stable.

Well, yes ... and no. The general sweep of the story is there. But the details are less clear.

Luke says nothing about a donkey. Nothing about an innkeeper. Luke doesn't tell us if Mary gave birth in the nighttime or in the day. And if you look carefully, you'll notice he doesn't even tell us this any of this happened in a stable.

There *is* a manger for Jesus to be laid in. That detail is in Luke's story. But he never tells us where the manger itself was laid; it's only our preconceived notions that place it in a stable, or perhaps a barn ... somewhere out back.

Oh, and what about the inn? The inn in which there was no room for the Holy Family?

Well, we probably got that wrong as well. You see, Bethlehem was a tiny place. Not a city or a town by our standards. Perhaps 100 people lived there. No Roman road passed through it. All of which is to say there wouldn't have been enough commerce to support a commercial B&B.

And Joseph wouldn't have gone looking for public lodgings in any event. When he went to Bethlehem, his ancestral home, he'd have expected to find family there – and to stay with them.

And it was probably there that he'd have learned that, as it says in the Bible, “there was no place for them in the inn.” Except that's not quite what the Bible says; a more apt translation might tell us there was no space in the guest room there in the home of Joseph's relations.

It might help to imagine the design of a 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestinian home, basic by our standards: a single room for the whole extended family. A lower part of the room, near the doorway, was used for animals brought in for the night (to keep them safe from thieves or predators, and to provide body heat to help warm the house on cool nights for the benefit of family members).

The rest of that room, perhaps slightly raised above the entry area, was for family. Unsoiled by animals, that's where the family would eat and live. And at night, family members could roll out their mats on the floor there, somewhat removed from the animals, to sleep.

A depression in the ground might separate the four-legged inhabitants in one part of the house from the rest of the household in the other. Filled with straw, it would become a feeding trough, a manger. (Only the wealthy could likely afford stables apart from the house.)

There might be a guest room above the house, or closed off from the rest of it – more of a walk-in closet, by our standards: used for storage most of the time; opened up for guests as needed.

This would have been the room **not** made available to Mary and Joseph. Perhaps other members of the extended family arrived there ahead of them. Mary and Joseph would also have been welcomed, but room would have been made for them in the main part of the house, squeezing in with the rest of the family.

And then, “while they were there, [and] the time came for [Mary] to deliver the child ...” well, it would have been a big deal for everyone! Oh, children were always being born. Even in isolated villages. But labor and delivery have never been casual events. And so – especially in small village like Bethlehem - a birth would not happen without all the neighbors taking notice.

And for that reason, the people of Bethlehem would not have given Mary and Joseph privacy for the birth of their child. Instead of privacy, they’d have given them something better; they’d have given them a family.

I imagine the menfolk sitting outside and fretting, while neighboring women would have come to help in the birth. They’d have filled the house, assisting the midwife, getting warm water, retrieving bedding.

And when the child was born, they’d have helped wrap him in the way they wrapped all babies in those days, in bands of cloth – the 1<sup>st</sup> century equivalent of a receiving blanket. And then, looking around, they’d have looked at the straw-filled depression near the lower end of the house, nearest the warmth of the animals, and declared that it was the most natural place to choose to lay the baby Jesus.

From what little Luke actually says, this may better describe Jesus’ birth. Rather than being born in a cold, dark stable, sad and alone, an outcast from his birth, Jesus may have been born in the midst of family and all the visiting friends and relations ... and nosy neighbors, too.

I’d make the case that it’s good news, in fact, that there was no space for Joseph and Mary in the guest room. A guest room, tucked upstairs, would have been too small for all this activity; and it wouldn’t have accommodated everyone who needed to be there for that occasion, everyone taking part in the birthing of Jesus into the world.

Jesus’ birth brought them all together for a common purpose. No matter what squabbles they may have engaged in before, they all came together to welcome Jesus into this world.

And though this might wreck the Christmas of our imagination a little, I hope it might also remind us that the holy one comes close to us where we are, right here, right now.

The obvious point of the Christmas story, of course, is that Jesus did not enter this world as a king to rule over us, but as one of us to dwell among us, to live where we live. The less obvious point is that imagining Jesus born in a stable is, in some ways, as remote from our lived lives as a castle in the clouds.

The message of the Incarnation is that God becomes flesh to be born in our midst. In our world. In our homes. In our lives. Amidst our silly diversions. Amidst our sacred occupations. Amidst even our sordid squabbles.

And if the world celebrates Christmas without going to church, then maybe that's fine. After all, none of us lives here. The world out there is where Christmas is really happening.

Wherever – and whenever – people gather to foster care and support for one another, Jesus is being born again.

Wherever – and whenever – we set aside all that divides us and remember that we are all children of God, Jesus is being born again.

Wherever – and whenever – we tend to the least among us in our midst, Jesus is being born again.

Wherever – and whenever – a little light and warmth of this holy night is shared, it matters not if we're in church, for Jesus is being born again.