

Christmas Day

The Rev. Brooks Cato

Oh Lord, we're finally here. Merry Christmas, and Happy Sabbath! It's fairly unusual that both those things happen at the same time, and it's kind of astounding when we think about what each thing stands for. Christmas is all about the arrival of Christ in this world! We've been waiting for just this moment for ages, and it's finally here! Ah. Sundays, now Sundays are funky. We celebrate the Resurrection of that same Jesus, which is amazing, but it's also an intense road to get here. From that baby's birth to the Holy Family's flight from persecution to a life of conflict and miracle and inspirational sermons and terrifying brushes with demons and death and political intrigue, and ultimately, to the cross, this life that only just arrived holds quite a lot in store. That baby is going to have one heckuva ride. And it already did. We know the whole story. Or do we?

We know the highlights, and we get glimpses of some peaceful perhaps mundane moments. But we don't see a lot of the in-betweens. We don't see what carpentry lessons with Joseph looked like. We don't see Jesus as a teenager doing dishes. We don't see Christ in College. We don't know anything of his relationships, outside of family ties and close disciples. We don't even know what happened those three days he lay in the tomb, though we do like to guess. We know the tomb came up empty and death lost its sting, but we don't know how, not really. And we know the Spirit stayed with us as Jesus rose on up, but since then, well, we still only know parts of the story. The main thing we do know about the story is that, somehow, we still have a story. The Word became flesh and implanted in our minds and fired our hearts.

But one of those gaps in the story hit me this year. Last night we saw Mary and Joseph do the thing we always see on Christmas Eve: they went knocking door to door, the Inn was full, and they took up residence in the barn just quick enough for Jesus to be born with cows and donkeys watching. But we don't hear much else about that inn or the people inside it. I know, Jesus is the focus of the story, but God became human in that birth, so we should probably take a look at the humans nearby.

When I was in college, I remember my nextdoor wallmate. He was a funny dude, a little mischievous, but also an incredible guitar player. Actually, these days he's touring the world in a heavy metal band. Kinda makes sense when I look back. Anyway, I remember those walls being paper thin, and he would play his distorted guitar at all hours, which mostly was never a problem because it was college and all hours were fair game. Once in a while, all you'd have to do to get him to turn it down was just knock on the wall. Ok, sometimes you had to holler a little, but he heard just fine. A bird's eye view would've shown us maybe three feet apart with a thin wall separating us, but from inside our rooms, we were clearly in different places.

It's that image, actually, that bird's eye view (or maybe an angel's eye view today) that comes to mind with the manger and the inn. Like, imagine a site plan, blueprints with all of Judea laid out and homes over here with the business district over there. Or homes stacked on top of market store fronts. Or whatever, you get the idea. All those people packed in tight in a big city, and then zoom in to the street with the inn, and there it is, welcome sign flashing right by the road, the inn with no vacancy in spite of its considerable footprint, barn out back. From that bird's eye/angel's eye view, the difference between the barn and the manger isn't all that great from a room in the inn just feet away on the other side of a couple of walls. Sure, it's physically close by, but we all know those rooms in the inn were a far cry cozier than anything a feed trough could offer.

So, who else was there? Who were the proverbial wall mates to Jesus' birth? How many of 'em knocked on paper thin walls to get the wailing mother to hush so they could grab some sleep? Did anyone see the family ride up, pregnant wife clearly in distress, and watch them get turned away? Did anyone breathe a sigh of relief when they saw the family make their way to the barn, shelter over their heads, at least? Better yet, did anyone think, "hey, maybe I could trade spots with them? It's just one night. I'm a single guy with a Herod-sized bed.

I've slept in barns before, what's one more night?" Looking out the window of their room in the inn, did anyone see, and if they did, did anyone wonder if maybe something wasn't right about how this was all shaking out?

From the word go, no one seems to understand who Jesus is and what's going on around him. No one offers up their room at the inn. No one listens to what he has to say about scripture. No one listens to his preaching, no one dares to eat with him, no one believes he is who he says he is. No one, that is except for one or two here and there. One or two that tell someone else and ask them to come and see. No one else but a few shepherds, a few wise men, a handful of fishermen, a couple of women, a steward fresh out of wine. No one knows for quite a while, and even when the secret starts to get out, mostly no one knows. There's this stirring of the sacred in Galilee, but the rest of the world comprehended it not, the Word who was there from the beginning unseen, unknown, and unrecognized all the way to that Inn in Judea and maybe even to here and now.

I wonder where we land, as we celebrate in our own quiet way this morning. Given the year we've had, the years we've had, I'm not proud to admit that I'm feeling a little more like someone cozy in the inn staring out and watching the drama unfold but unsure I'm ready to give up my warm bed to make space for that sacred event to happen in a more fitting place. I hope I can do it, but I don't know if I can. I suppose this is all part of the story, filling in the blanks when we're not even sure we can recognize what's really going on around us. Wherever we land, though, turning away at the entrance to the inn, watching from the warmth of our room, crouching beside the manger, watching from the hillside, trekking in from afar, or completely unaware of what's going on, Christ comes for us all. As John says, that Word becomes flesh, and lives among us, full of grace and truth. That's our story. Merry Christmas.