

**Homily – No Room in the Inn**

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Merry Christmas! Many, including myself, think of Christmas Eve as the most beautiful night of the year. Each year, the traditions, the music, and the candle light all make our annual observance of the birth of Jesus very memorable.

Since I have had more than fifty Christmases, some of them have started to blend together in my own memory. The easiest way for me to remember a specific Christmas is to look at photos. I could probably find photos for each of my annual observances of Christmas. It is funny how an image in a photograph can help me remember a specific Christmas. Maybe you are the same way.

Major life events also help me to remember some specific Christmases. For example, my grandfather died two days after our Christmas visit in 2006. I remember that last Christmas with my grandfather. It was nineteen years ago.

And, my daughter was born a week before Christmas in 1992. I remember that first Christmas of being a dad. I also remember that I started drinking coffee the week my daughter was born. As a new dad, I was tired all the time, so that Christmas in 1992 would have been my first Christmas morning with coffee.

Are you like me? Do you also remember some Christmases by the major events of your life?

One of the things that does not help me remember a specific Christmas are the presents that I gave or received. After more than fifty Christmases the presents have all sort of blended together. Although, I do remember we gave my mother a cat one year for Christmas. That was sort of special, so I do remember that Christmas of 1983.

Now, when I moved here to California twenty-nine years ago, my Christmases shifted since I was now three thousand miles from family. Christmas became more about time with friends. I remember some of the families that opened up their homes to those of us that could not be with our own families. One can feel a little blue when you can no longer spend time at Christmas with family. It took me a few years to get used to that, but there can be a lot of beauty in Christmas even when you can't be with family. Maybe you have made this transition as well.

One of the things I have learned after more than fifty Christmases is that some of the things that I cherished the most about Christmas, don't need to be there. Christmas

can still be beautiful. Maybe you have experienced this as well. Maybe you have learned to experience beauty at the same time that you still have a sense of loss. There is wisdom in learning to live in that space that has both beauty and loss.

As I think back over my many Christmases I think there are only a very few things that I have done all of my Christmases. One of those things is that every single Christmas Eve, I have gone to church. Every single Christmas Eve I have gathered with others who are also remembering the birth of Jesus more than two thousand years ago. Over the years, the churches and style of worship may have varied, but each year we have always remember the birth of the baby Jesus as we worship God.

We remember the way that Mary and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem.

We remember the star.

We remember angels.

We remember the shepherds.

Would it ruin Christmas for you if I told you something new about this nativity story?

Do you think it is even possible for me to tell you something new about the birth of Jesus? Well, let me try.

This is something that I learned in the first meeting of my Greek class back in seminary, and I think the professor told us this new part of the birth story to get us excited about studying ancient Greek. Remember the New Testament, including the four Gospels, was originally written in ancient Greek. And scholars, including seminar Greek professors, dissect each Greek word of the Bible.

Earlier we heard Susan read from one of our English versions of the Bible. *"Mary laid him in a manger, because there was no place (or room) for them in the inn."*

Some scholars, including my professor, said that this could also be translated as *"Mary laid him in a manger, because it was no place in the common room."*

The traditional "no room in the inn" lets us feel sorry for Mary. Even in labor, poor Mary had to go out with the dirty animals. How low can you go?

However, the translation, "it was no place in the common room" has a different nuance. It may be that Mary just did not want to go through labor and delivery in a

common public space where others were gathered. It may be that Mary wanted some privacy. She didn't want to give birth in the busy lobby of an office building.

This second valid translation from the original Greek makes sense to me, and it allows us to let go of some of the pity that we might have had for Mary.

Now, whether I go with the first translation or the second does not have much if any impact on my personal spiritual journey. Though, we might have to rewrite some of the children's Christmas pageants.

However, the distinctions between the two translations does make me wonder what other extraneous details I have layered onto the stories of Jesus. And by extension, do the extra layers actually impact my spirituality or are they just icing on the cake.

Now, I am one that is convicted that the life, death and resurrection of Jesus have changed the universe forever. Jesus is firmly part of my spiritual journey, and I hope that our community here at St. Barnabas can enable your spiritual journey with Jesus as well.

I wonder , at times, what parts of the birth narrative are core for my spiritual journey, and if I get back to my own core definitions of spirituality it is all about relationships – relationships with God, others, and self. We respond to the eternal and unchanging love and grace of God by loving God back, by loving others, and by loving ourselves.

Again, for me, the core of spirituality is around relationships and love. And, it is about being aware of and responding to the fact that God is always – always present with me and with every single one of you as well. This is something that I often forget.

Two thousand years ago, with the birth of Jesus, "God was given a face and a heart. God became someone we could love. While God can be described as a moral force, as consciousness, and as high vibrational energy, the truth is, we don't fall in love with abstractions. So God became a person that we could hear, see with our eyes, look at, and touch with our hands.

The Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas says the only thing that really converts people is "the face of the other." When the face of the other, especially the suffering face, is received and empathized with, it leads to transformation of our whole being. It creates a moral demand on our heart that is far more compelling than the Ten Commandments. Just giving people commandments on tablets of stone doesn't change the heart. It may steel the will, but it doesn't soften the heart like an encounter with the living God can." That is the core part of the beauty that we

celebrate on Christmas night. We remember and show love for the birth of a very special baby.

Over the years most of us will have shifts in the ways that we view and receive God. Most of us will have changes in the ways that we celebrate Christmas. Most of us will have zigzags in our spiritual journeys and in our relationships with God, others and self.

Through all of the normal changes, my prayer is that every year we each continue to come into community to celebrate the most beautiful night of the year, create new memories, and remember one of the unchanging wonders of the universe – the birth of Jesus.