

Christmas Eve Homily
December 24, 2017
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My father used to tell a story about a city where he lived, where a neighborhood church put up a lifesize nativity scene on its front lawn, with the baby Jesus in the manger, and Mary and Joseph and the shepherds and the Wise Men all gathered around him, all made of painted plaster, and straw on the floor, and a little stable roof above, and a light bulb over that for the star of Bethlehem.

Very charming, except for this elaborate cage of barbed wire wrapped around the manger, to discourage the public from stealing the baby Jesus. I can appreciate that the church would not want to replace a part of its creche, especially the most important part, but as my father said, the the wire created a strange theological statement to the public. It seemed to be saying: you can look, from a distance, but don't touch. Don't even get close. *This baby doesn't really belong to you.*

The irony being, of course, that this story is all about us.

At the heart of the Christmas story is this yearning insight, this compelling premise that God loved us so much that God decided to pitch a tent here with us. God came into the world and entered this life of ours, just to be with us. And not with fanfare or mighty thunder. No, God came in the most vulnerable form imaginable, a newborn infant.

Someone had to take this God in their arms, and provide nurture, and shelter, and warmth, and food, and love, the way that Mary and Joseph did so long ago, even though there wasn't room at the inn, even though they had to flee for their lives to Egypt.

God still enters the world this way, I think, tender and unarmed, in a way that we can easily turn God down. And we *have* turned God down, many times, and we *still* turn God down, every day.

2017 has been a year in which God has been kept behind barbed wire, a year in which humankind has turned God away, again and again and again. I don't need to scroll through examples for you; we know them, those countless times humans profane God in the way we reject each other, degrade each other, neglect each other, kill each other. I've forgotten what it's like to read the news without cringing, or even sometimes crying.

And we might well start to wonder, why would God *want* to pitch a tent here? Why would God *want* to be with us? What have we done to deserve God's presence among us?

Maybe it's not about what we deserve or don't deserve. Maybe the reason this story, this Christmas story, endures is not because it offers good, rational explanations, but because it speaks to something deeper in our souls. Something comforting. Something familiar. Something even a little magical.

Let's return to the nativity scene. *Without* the barbed wire. And let's remember that nativity scenes almost always have some important players in addition to people: animals. Oxen. Donkeys. Sheep. As an animal lover, I'm always drawn to these additional witnesses to the birth of Christ, and I

love how, in art, they are depicted as wide-eyed and full of wonder as their human counterparts.

There's an old legend that says that at midnight on Christmas Eve, animals can talk. Just for a few moments on that one night of the year, God gives them the power of speech, since the son of God enjoyed their hospitality on the night of his birth.

But the legend also says that if you or I should hear the animals talking, we'd be in big trouble with God. Their secrets are not meant for our listening. So don't sit up late tonight waiting for a heart-to-heart with your cat or dog.

What *is* it that we're not supposed to hear?

It could be that at midnight on Christmas Eve the animals are saying things too wonderful for human ears, suggesting that there will always be something about Christmas that's simply beyond us, always some mystery to it that we can't fathom. The legend of the talking animals reminds us that *we don't know everything*, especially when it comes to God and God's reasons and God's ways.

This story, this ancient story we tell and retell, has stuck with us for a reason: because it tells us something we need to hear, in our deepest selves. It answers a question maybe we didn't even know we were asking.

Is there still a chance for new life in this broken world?

Yes.

Can love exist in even the most wretched of places?

Yes.

Is there hope for us?

Yes.

Always yes.

The “yes” is especially true when we are able to embody that hope ourselves. When we believe that the divine spark isn’t confined to the manger, isn’t contained by the life of Jesus but unleashed by it, *and it could show up just about anywhere.*

That’s what this story of Jesus’ birth among us really means: that if God chose to be born in *that* out of the way place, to *those* out-of-the-way people, then we can never be quite sure where or when God might appear.

The 15th-century artist Albrecht Durer, whenever he made a portrait of Jesus, didn’t just give Jesus some generic face or base him off any old model. No, he used his own face, his own unique features to create his images of Jesus. This may seem like an incredible act of vanity, but maybe there’s a powerful metaphor there for us. God’s image is as real in Jesus as it is in *me*, as it is in *you*, as it is in friend, neighbor, enemy, and stranger.

So for God’s sake, and our sakes too, let us feed God’s sheep, let us seek peace, let us visit the prisoners and welcome the refugee, and let us practice compassion first, before all else. Because that’s what God’s transforming love needs in order to take root here, among us, and thrive.

And remember, that tiny little baby that we love to love? He *grew up*, and he grew into a man with a holy and dangerous mission, who called on everyone who dared follow him to do these things, and to do them especially for the least among us.

And this is a story we will tell, and re-tell, and nothing we have done or will do can ever change the Good News of it.

Thanks be to God, and Merry Christmas.