

Christmas Musings

Some twenty-five years ago a group of Kalamazoo College students staged a protest against the commercialization of Christmas. One carried a sign that read, “If Mary and Joseph had started this early, there would have been room in the inn.”

Just think of it! The whole Christmas story ruined by only a bit of advance planning. Instead of a late-night arrival, in the middle of winter, the couple from Nazareth might have showed up in broad daylight. Instead of being relegated to a stable out back with barnyard animals and all those barnyard noises, deposits, and smells, they might have been put up in the new bridal suite. Instead of placing the baby Jesus in a manger--literally an animal feeding trough or crib-- the newborn child might have enjoyed crisp sheets and a fine basinet. Nowadays, of course, there would be no need to arrive early--just call ahead and make reservations, guaranteed with Master Card, Visa, or Judean Express.

As for the rest of the story, it's hard to imagine any crude fellows like the shepherds being allowed to step foot in the Bethlehem Hilton. It's not clear who, then, would have gotten word out about this birth. For Mary and Joseph it might have meant a rather sterile and lonely nativity

The Christmas story, as Luke tells it, is chock full of biblical allusions and special meanings. Its truth is not that of history, but of poetry and myth. It is about the reality of the divine in the midst of the most humble of circumstances. It is about God's presence with the lowly, the “meek of the earth,” not just emperors and kings. Indeed, as Matthew tells the story, King Herod has no clue what's going on. Once he finds out, however, Mary, Joseph, and the babe must flee to Egypt for safety. The King dare not brook any rivals. His imperial power will prove no match for the power of love incarnate.

If there's any way to master Christmas, I've yet to find it. So I try to just let it happen, without neglecting to send a few gifts to family members and a bunch of Christmas letters to people with whom we do not want to lose touch. My only advice: You don't have to make big plans. But do show up when you can. And be open to the possibilities of new birth.

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