

“FIRST IMPRESSIONS” CHRISTMAS MIDNIGHT
Isaiah 9: 1-6 Psalm 96 Titus 2: 11-14 Luke 2: 1-14

By: Jude

Siciliano, OP

Dear Preachers:

When I am in New York visiting family, one of my favorite Christmas season treats is a trip to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Each Christmas the museum puts up a very large Christmas tree in a spacious gallery. On and around the tree are exquisite Christmas figures from a collection of Neapolitan artists of the 17th. century. This collection shows the traditional crib settings as well as domestic scenes of trades and village life of the time. People of all religions and of no religion come to see this multiple work of art. It's a lovely setting, with its subdued lighting and a tape of Gregorian chant playing in the background. Outside is busy 5th. Avenue noisier than usual with the bustle of working people and holiday tourists. Inside, before the Christmas tree all is hushed in reverence, or at least respect. It is a such a calm scene. “All is calm, all is bright” the carol says.

But the reality that is spelled out in this evening's Gospel reading clashes with the otherworldly tranquility of the crib scene. The preacher will have to pay careful attention to readings like this one during this Christmas s season. It is easy to get caught up in the cozy sounds of the readings, the pageants, Christmas card depictions, nativity scenes displayed on lawns in the neighborhood, the saccharine music on radio and seasonal television programs. In addition, this reading is proclaimed at an evening or midnight service, all the more temptation to sentimentalize and wax eloquent. No one is suggesting the preacher take up Ebenezer Scrooge's mantel and “bah humbug” the celebration, but tend carefully to readings like tonight's, listen for the voice of God and preach out of the focus of your meditation and pastoral alertness. We need to look beneath the surface of these stories and the cultural veneer put on them by society.

Let's look at tonight's Gospel. It is from Luke and we know something about how this evangelist presents Christ. Luke's gospel shows the manifestation of God's Spirit bringing the freedom of God's reign to an alienated world. When this child becomes an adult and makes his first public discourse (4:14-21—the 3rd Sunday) he will state clearly what God will accomplish through his life: “...to bring glad tidings to the poor,...to proclaim liberty to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and release to prisoners and to announce a year of favor from the Lord.”

This “mission statement” pronounced by Jesus in the synagogue is a leitmotif throughout Luke and so it is already being proclaimed in the infancy narrative. God has become one with the oppressed. Hear the order of the reigning power, “a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that the whole world would be enrolled.” The whole world? What presumption, what dominance! That’s how the powerful always speak, “We command and you will obey.” Never mind the consequences on the lives of those subjected and inconvenienced by such decrees. This infant is a Jewish child, born to a long oppressed people who have kept their hopes in God alive through generations of forced migrations, displacements, subjugation and enslavement. In addition, heavy taxation by foreigners, who have grown rich themselves, has left the ordinary people desperately poor. God has decided to be born and dwell among these victimized people of no consequence. So we can see that Luke’s core message of God’s identification with and concern for the outcast is already present in this nativity story.

And who should be the first to hear this joyful news, but shepherds who themselves were outcasts from their society. The place of this birth is in the royal city of David. This child is to be a ruler in the manner of David, the shepherd king. The Jewish people were awaiting the birth of a Davidic ruler who would bring “shalom”—a freedom from oppression and a security that would replace the burdensome fear they had lived in for such a long time. When royal children are born nations send emissaries or at least official congratulations and gifts. But the first visitors to this royal descendent, with rags for royal garments and an animal’s trough for a throne, are shepherds. Because the shepherds lived with animals they were considered ritually unclean. Their traveling ways made them suspect and they were not acceptable as witnesses in court. Yet these “disreputable” ones are the first outsiders to get the word of the savior’s birth and they will bear witness, when they arrive at the scene of the birth, to what the angels told them out in the fields, “...all who heard were astonished at what the shepherds said” (2:17).

The shepherds embody the rejects and the disreputable, but they are told by the heavenly visitors not to be afraid. This was certainly good news to the shepherds who are the first to hear this message and who go looking for its fulfillment in the new born child. The birth of this child is not an occasion for fear by sinners and outcasts; but rather it shows once again that God is on the side of the outsiders. Have no fear, they hear, this birth is good news to you and all like you.

Over this liturgical year we will hear the Christ of Luke’s Gospel appealing in many ways to the poor and disenfranchised. Luke shows in his gospel that through this child we have all received good news. We have been given our freedom and

have the power to act and think free from the restraints of sin. What is suggested at Jesus' birth will be made manifest throughout Luke. This child will liberate us from the sin that spawns in us isolation, fragmentation, egoism, materialism and a host of the other consequences of sin.

Each of us has need for the freedom Christ brings. Our attachments, preoccupations and addictions keep us constrained. They keep us locked up like prisoners, confined in cells that are often of our own making. We witnesses to the birth of the savior know that all who worship at his crib this evening will soon have to rise from their knees and, empowered with his Spirit, address the same issues he did in the world. Subsequent Sunday passages from Luke will reveal Jesus' mission, a mission that is passed on to us his disciples. Elsewhere in the world there are powerful and impersonal forces that inhibit human freedom, keeping people in psychological, economic and social constraints. This birth is only a moment in the unfolding of God's plan both for Christ and for us. We pause, worship in awe and then go from this place to put into practice what we have learned this evening.

Here is some good advice on the telling of the Christmas story I found in a past edition of CELEBRATING THE LITURGY (Resource Publications, Inc.1995, p.93)

No Room in What Inn?

Be careful how you tell the Christmas story. Popular tradition, which probably developed from a medieval morality play, holds that Joseph and his very pregnant wife travel wearily from door to door in Bethlehem looking of a place to stay. After several doors slammed in their faces, a kindly old man takes pity on them and shows them a cave or a stable out somewhere in the boondocks.

There are problem with this telling. The first is that in tends to leave the listener with an image of greedy Jewish innkeepers slamming the door on the Christ. It's not a good story for interfaith relations. Besides, it is not at all biblical. The whole creche scene and its attending story derives from a single line from Luke 2:7.

Some translations speak of an "inn." In small villages of this time and place, there were no inns. Travelers in normal times would have gone to the village square, sat there, and waited. Villagers were honor-bound to offer the travelers food and shelter. Hospitality was a core value in te Middle East, then as now. Leaving a traveler stranded was unthinkable. The villager who passed by the travelers without offering food and lodging would have brought shame on the entire village. Bethlehem, about five miles south of Jerusalem, would have swelled with pilgrimage during the three great festivals of the year. Probably pilgrims would

have stayed in an open air camping area called a “caravansary” located near the center of town and the markets. The caravansaries had no “innkeepers.” If Joseph and Mary happened upon the caravansary, they could have seen for themselves that it was full and was not, in any case, private enough for a woman about to give birth. If Bethlehem was Joseph’s ancestral home, he would have been known to relatives who might have found a place for him and his wife. Where? In a less crowded time, they might have been shown to the guest room, most likely an “upper room,” which might have been a lean-to on the roof. If that was crowded, perhaps they made room for them downstairs, in the courtyard where the animals stayed. It wasn’t the Taj Mahal, but it wasn’t Siberia either. Keep in mind that this account of Jesus’ birth differs radically from the account in Matthew and that Mark and John have no account of the birth of Jesus.

For further reading see *THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH*, (Image Books) by Father Raymond Brown. You can still work with the nativity scene. You might even add figures representing cousins, aunts, and uncles. The shepherds might have been relatives. This helps give a more culturally realistic picture of the Holy Family as well.

QUOTABLE:

A Poem for Christmas

There must be always
 remaining in every life,
some place for the
 singing of angels.

Some place for that
 which in itself
 is breathless and
 beautiful.

Old burdens become lighter
 deep and ancient wounds
lose much of their old hurting.

Despite all the crassness of life,
 all the hardness and
 harsh discords,

life is saved by
the singing of angels.

--from **The Mood of Christmas**, by Howard Thurman

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You can order the CDs by going to our webpage: www.preacherexchange.com and clicking on the "First Impressions" CDs link on the left.

2. I get notes from people responding to these reflections. Sometimes they tell how they use “First Impressions” in their ministry and for personal use. Others respond to the reflections, make suggestions and additions. I think our readers would benefit from these additional thoughts. If you drop me a BRIEF note, I will be happy to add your thoughts and reflections to my own. (Judeop@Juno.com)

3. Our webpage: <http://www.preacherexchange.com>

Where you will find “Preachers’ Exchange,” which includes "First Impressions" and “Homilias Dominicales,” as well as articles, book reviews and quotes pertinent to preaching.

4. “Homilias Dominicales”-- these Spanish reflections are written by three friars of the Southern Dominican Province, Jose David Padilla, OP, Wilmo Candanedo, OP and two Dominican sisters, Regina Mc Carthy, OP and Doris Regan, OP.

Like “First Impressions”, “Homilias Dominicales” are a preacher’s early reflections on the upcoming Sunday readings and liturgy. So, if you or a friend would like to receive “Homilias Dominicales” drop a note to John Boll, O.P. at: Jboll@opsouth.org or jboll@preacherexchange.org

5. "First Impressions" is a service to preachers and those wishing to prepare for Sunday worship. It is sponsored by the Southern Dominican Province, U.S.A. If

you would like "First Impressions" sent weekly to a friend, send a note to John Boll at the above Email address.

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Thank you.

Blessings on your preaching,

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