

“Could this be the year?”

With the coming of Christmas Day our Advent journey of waiting and expectation ends. Many people think that, as the poet Marie Howe wrote, “You think this only happened once and long ago.” If that is true, then our best efforts this year or any year is for a memorial. We look back more than two thousand years and think how wonderful and miraculous it was. We might longingly add, “Too bad it is not happening now. We sure could use it.”

Yet I contend that the paradox of Christmas is that it happened long ago and in a strange land, and, if we want it to, it will happen again this year and in this and every land. We do not have to be wistful for a simpler time, and a picturesque crèche scene. Not only were those times not so simple, but they were as fraught as any times in history.

While people are often excited about the birth of a child, if we think about the circumstances of the birth of Jesus we might think twice. Remember that Mary and Joseph were not yet married. Joseph had his doubts about Mary and considered sending her away quietly. It took the visitation of an angel to assuage Joseph’s concerns. And in Matthew’s Gospel there is also the jealous and insecure King Herod lurking just over the horizon in Jerusalem. He was the King of the Jews as designated by Rome, and he did not take kindly to the idea that there was a new King of the Jews who might usurp his power. This man was so paranoid he had several of his sons and a wife killed because he feared they were plotting to overthrow him.

Far from being a rustic scene with the Holy Family surrounded by shepherds and Magi, Mary, Joseph, are alone, confused, and perhaps afraid. They have this little child who is the Son of God to care for. What are they to do? Fortunately, they have special messages from God to guide them, but being a refugee on the run is not easy even with almost nonexistent borders. Refugees were treated with as much suspicion then as they are now.

However, our minds are not on the plight of the Holy Family, but on our eager anticipation of Jesus’ birth. Our yearnings and our hopes are all encompassed in the birth of this little baby. There is an authentic desire that this year’s birth of Jesus will be the one—the one that marks the new age of peace on earth and good will for all people. There is something about December 25th that feeds our hopes.

We are a people whose hearts have been broken again and again by this world. We have put our trust in ideas, philosophies, governments, and movements and they have all turned out to have clay feet. We know there is something genuine because we have experienced it—in a sunset, in the touch of our beloved’s hand, in the smile of a stranger, in the thrill of a song, or in an unexplained, but very real, joy. We know there is something, and we know because it was planted inside of each of us in our mother’s womb.

We have the divine spark. That is how we know that we are made for something more profound than the clay-footed idols of this world. Each year when we approach Christmas Day we feel the yearning grow. Each year we prepare and hope.

In the 17th century a Dutch mystical poet named Angelus Silesius who was famous for writing religious poems especially in the form known as an alexandrine couplet¹ wrote this:

“If in your heart you make a manger for his birth
Then God will once again become a child on earth.”

It is a simple theology. Open your heart and make a place for God there, and God will come. Although it sounds simple God knows it is not. We know from scripture how God worked to infiltrate the human heart. Jeremiah² and Ezekiel³ both speak about God’s desire to have the hearts of the people. God fights for our hearts, but our hearts get distracted by money, self-importance, lust, pain, resentment, and power. The misguided world keeps looking for God in the flash of celebrity, power politics, aggression, demagoguery, and possessions. But we know that that is not where God breaks in.

God breaks into the world in the form of a baby, born to poor parents, living unremarkable, but faithful lives in a backwater of the greatest empire the western world had known. God breaks into the world in a dingy stable. God breaks in with the wail of a newborn, not the battle cry of the empire. God is stealthy because the human heart is weak and easily distracted. But the human heart is also yearning for what God is offering. The heart is longing for love, peace, justice, and good will among peoples. As Archbishop Tutu wrote, “The heart is made for love.”⁴ And it is only the love of God that will fulfill its yearning.

This Christmas Day make a manger in your heart. Craft your hands and heart into a cradle for the body of Christ who will come in the form of a baby and wants to live on in your heart. Babies are fragile, as is love, but babies are also resilient, as is love. You will find this baby even moreso.

I will close with a portion of a short prayer written by my dear friend Glenna Bailey.

“Holy God, Help us to use [this Christmas day] to prepare a manger in our hearts

with the fresh, clean air of
forgiveness

and the sweet, soft hay of
gratitude.” Amen

¹ Alexandrine Couplet- an alexandrine is a line of iambic hexameter, so an alexandrine couplet is two rhymed lines of such. <https://uni.edu/~gotera/CraftOfPoetry/couplet.html#:~:text=Alexandrine%20Couplet%2D%20an%20alexandrine%20is,cases%2C%20are%20also%20called%20codas>. Accessed 12/23/23.

² Jeremiah 24:7 & 31:33

³ Ezekiel 11:19

⁴ Desmond Tutu & Mpho Tutu. *Made for Goodness: And Why This Makes All the Difference* [San Francisco: HarperOne, 2011]