

“A Manger in Our Hearts”

Undoubtedly you remember the scene from “A Charlie Brown Christmas” where Lucy tries to get Schroeder to play “Jingle Bells.” With each explanation she offers Schroeder plays a different intricate version that sounds like Mozart, or a church organ. Finally in exasperation Lucy says, “No, no. You don't get it at all. I mean ‘Jingle Bells.’ You know, Santa Claus and ho-ho-ho, and mistletoe and presents to pretty girls.” Schroeder responds by plunking out “Jingle Bells” with one finger on his toy piano. At which point Lucy exclaims “That’s it.”

In some ways the traditional scripture selection for Christmas Day leaves me feeling like Lucy. After hearing the Christ Hymn from the first chapter of John I wonder what happened to the shepherds, angels, Mary and Joseph, animals in the stable, and, most of all, the Christ child. How did we get from Christmas to this dense passage of theology over night?

Yet, this is the deeper meaning of Christmas. The crèche scenes are wonderful, but what we celebrate and commemorate is the coming of God into the world. No longer is God a being of otherness beyond our ken. God was with us before, but now God is one of us. What’s more God is not coming into the world on a fiery chariot or a blaze of lightening or an earthquake. God has come into the world like the still, small voice that addressed Elijah. God has come as a baby, just like every other human being before and since.

This is important, for God has taken to entering our individual lives in small ways. The simplicity of God’s entry has many purposes. God will not force himself on us. If money, prestige, and power are more important, we can shove God into a corner, like the babe in a stable when there was no room at the inn. God allows us come to him of our own accord and in our own time. God gives us options.

God could zap us or perform miraculous deeds such as parting the Red Sea or tearing down the walls of Jericho. But with the birth of Jesus, God chooses a different path into the hearts of recalcitrant humans. God is going to gain our hearts not with fear or awesome power but with love. Love like that of a mother for her newborn baby. The child that caused so much pain during labor becomes is the one that the mother beams upon with overwhelming love moments later.

God attracts us like a newborn. Indeed, each year we can give birth to Jesus in our hearts. Each year we have the opportunity to refocus on the one who was before all time as John explains in his hymn. Once again we have the opportunity this year.

Angelus Silesius, seventeenth century poet, doctor and mystic wrote, “If in your heart you make a manger for his birth, then God will once again become a child on earth.” That is God’s invitation each Christmas. We can accept the invitation by opening our hearts to the Christ child and give him a place to be born in ourselves.

This year has made us weary at Christmas in a different way from past Christmases. It is not the parties, shopping, cooking, and festivities that make us tire this year. It is sadness for what we have endured and what we have lost these past nine months. That difference also provides an opening to respond differently to God’s invitation this Christmas. Don’t miss it. Don’t relegate the manger to Bethlehem two thousand years ago. Make a manger in your heart and welcome God in. There is no better gift we can give ourselves and the world.