

Friends of the Center

Welcoming Jesus

For those of us who have been attending church for as long as we can remember, we know all too well the stories of Advent and Christmas. Whether performed in pageants or recounted in Scriptural readings, rehearsed in Sunday School lessons or heard preached, these are deeply familiar stories.

Mary's surprising call to bear the Son of God. Joseph's hesitation. The difficult journey. The manger. Shepherds and their awe. And the magi and their three gifts, of course, a detail inescapable in my Puerto Rican household growing up! The challenge as we approach yet another Advent season is how we might hear these stories anew and afresh, finding a way for these old, old stories to come to life in ways that will transform us again. Is there anything left to learn after having heard and read and experienced these stories so many times?

One approach I would commend this Advent is to revisit these stories we know all too well to discover assumptions we need to revise. A recent scholarly article has created new interpretive possibilities for me about the nativity account, specifically the account of Jesus' birth in Luke 2.

The traditional story I have heard all my life is that Jesus was born in a cold, dark, lonely stable because the inn where Joseph and Mary were to stay was full. The story might even include conniving inn owners trying to make some extra money at the expense of a desperate couple. Jesus, the story says, was born in humility verging on humiliation, a powerful testimony to God's unexpected incarnation among the poor and forgotten of the world. Jesus in this story was a victim of empire's power, as Caesar demand that the world, his world be counted required Jesus' family to take the dangerous and hope-filled road of the migrant, the traveler.

That is a powerful story but not the only one we can tell about Jesus' birth.

Stephen Carlson, a New Testament scholar, contends that the term translated as "inn" in many modern translations has a generic sense of a "place to stay" and that the final clause of Luke 2:7 should be translated "because they had no space in their place to stay." That is, instead of Luke imagining a full inn, he narrates how Joseph and Mary were staying with Joseph's family in Bethlehem in a guest room properly sized for a recently married couple but not big enough to accommodate the birth of a child.

Thus, Luke narrates that Mary and Joseph moved from "their place," the guest room to the common room in the home where their relatives would have been staying. This common room would have been the kitchen too, the heart of the ancient home. That Mary laid Jesus in a manger does not mean that they were in a drafty barn;



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instead, the manger was at the heart of the home because the animals the family kept were so valuable. The picture is of Mary and Joseph surrounded by friends and family during the dangers, anticipation, and joys of childbirth.

By this account, Jesus's birth was not dire or lonely but ordinary. Like most of us, he was born to light and love, to the warm embrace of people so happy to welcome him home.

Told this way, the story of Jesus' birth is remarkably unremarkable, quotidian even.

So how do we go about revisiting these old stories without the help of a scholarly insight like the example above? Many ways, my friends.

Read slowly and carefully. Turn the stories this way and that, putting them under different lights. Bring your questions, no matter how silly they may seem. Approach these stories with reverence but also with playfulness. Bring your own stories to these ancient tales, allowing your experiences to illuminate these Christmas accounts in a way others would not understand without your help.

In short, read with the hope that we have not exhausted these stories. They still have much to teach us, for God is not done surprising us with God's own mighty but everyday, extraordinary but ordinary presence. We are in search of salvation.

– Eric D. Barreto, Ph.D.