



COME ON IN

December 24, 2011, Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7; Psalm 96: 1-6, 11-13, Luke 2:1-20

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Theme: There is room for all in this place at this table.

By your grace, O God, may these familiar words become fresh in our hearing this night. Clothe them again with your power, O God. May your word strike us with fearsome awe as it struck those shepherds, and then, God of Grace, may your word quiet our fears as well, and lead us as it led them, to the Child of Bethlehem. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

I had lunch with my friend Jim Burns the week before last. Jim is the rector of the Episcopal Church of the Heavenly Rest on 5th Avenue at 90th. We talked shop, as you might expect, and then somehow – I don't recall how we got there – we started trading stories about Christmas pageants we had been involved in over the years – particularly Christmas pageants during which something went very wrong. You must know that this happens with some frequency. I mean, you're working with a cast of 100 children, all of whom are about ready to self-immolate with pre-Christmas excitement.

Jim had a very good story. He said that they've often done Christmas pageants replete with a real live animal or two. This is dramatically effective, but obviously highly risky. One year, Jim said they had somehow gotten hold of a llama – yes, a *llama*. This llama was to play the part of a wise man's camel. Camels are rare on the Upper East Side and rather too large for church interiors. Well, the llama processed down the aisle led by a wise man, all to great effect. Shortly after the llama arrived at the front of the church, it felt the need to relieve him or herself. This the llama did, in front of all, also to great effect, *very* great effect, Jim said. In fact, the olfactory effect on the children's choir was especially dramatic, they being in close proximity to the llama, causing a chain reaction of sick-to-the-stomach choristers, also very dramatic.



Good pageant story. I then countered with my favorite tale of a pageant gone wrong. It was more than thirty years ago when I was in seminary. One year, I did my fieldwork working as a chaplain's assistant at the Eastern State School and Hospital in Trevoise, Pennsylvania. Eastern State is a huge institution for mentally troubled children.

Come December, I somehow got myself assigned to direct the Eastern State Christmas pageant, starring a couple dozen kids with the doctors, nurses and parents for an audience. I recruited a little girl to be Mary who was actually named Mary. She took her role with utter and deeply pious seriousness. The kid I asked to play Joseph was another story. He was bright and loquacious, but constantly in trouble. He just didn't have an "off switch." We didn't even try to get any of the children to memorize lines. We had an adult narrator who simply read the nativity story out of Luke as the kids enacted it out on the stage. Simple as it was, we ran through it several times before the big day. At the rehearsal, the narrator read the Christmas story from the King James Version of the Bible and the kids walked through the drama, scene by scene. After that last rehearsal, one of my fellow seminary students observed that these youngsters probably were not much comprehending the antique language of the old King James, so why not switch to the new and much simpler Good News translation for the performance itself?

All went well during their performance until the scene in which Mary and Joseph were to walk on stage side-by-side while the narrator read Luke, Chapter 2, verse 4. At the rehearsal, he had read the crusty old KJV version that goes, "And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, to Judea, unto to the City of David, which is called Bethlehem, to be taxed with Mary, his espoused wife, being great with child." Of course, none of the kids had any idea what "great with child" meant, which was why it really did make some sense to use a modern translation. So come the day of the performance, as our sweet little Mary and goofy little Joseph strode on stage, instead of reading "...with Mary, his betrothed, who was great with child," the narrator read, "...with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage. She was pregnant." At that last word, our Joseph froze in his track, looked out at the audience, then directly at Mary and said, "'Pregnant?' What do you mean, 'pregnant!?'"



Things are often humorous because they speak a deep truth. Laughter, at least the best kind of laughter, can be the sudden, joyful recognition of that truth. Both of these pageantry mishaps actually bear truth in their humor. An indiscreet llama bluntly reminds us of that the place where our Savior, Lord of Lords and King of Kings was born was not merely humble, but doubtless smelly as well. Joseph's flabbergasted question to Mary reminds us of the surprising nature of our Lord's birth.

Well, I have one last pageant-gone-wrong tale for you. It too bears truth, unintended and accidental. And it the Christmas truth I want to leave with you tonight. I don't recall the source of this story; somebody told me the story ages ago. As it goes, a young boy has been chosen to play the role of the hypothetical character of the innkeeper in the church pageant. No innkeeper is mentioned in the Bible, but when you have lots of kids, extra roles need to be created. The kid was well rehearsed; he had only one line, and the director had written that one line on a three-by-five card to be held in his hand. Simple enough: Joseph knocks at the door of the inn; the innkeeper opens it, and speaks his one earnest line: "I'm sorry, but there's no room in the inn."

But come the moment in the actual pageant, in spite of the rehearsals, in spite of the three-by-five card, when the innkeeper opened the door, the child found himself blown off dramatic course. After a moment's hesitation, the boy *ad libbed* a new and unscripted innkeeper line. Seeing Mary and Joseph, his heart melted and he said, "Oh... alright! Come on in! We'll make room for you somewhere."

Well, there's deep truth in this pageant gone awry as well. That kid may have muffed his line, but the boy hit the theological nail on the head; the child got the Gospel just right. *There really is room for everybody. "So come on in!"*

Next to the Christmas story in Luke, the second most famous passage from the Bible is probably John 3:16. Engrained in the memory of even non-churchgoers, John 3:16 reads: "For God so loved the *world* that he gave his only begotten son..." But familiar as it is, there's a corner of the verse people often miss. It says God loved the *world*... the *whole* world – *everything and everybody*.



It doesn't say, "For God so loved Christians."
It doesn't say, "For God so loved hard-working people."
It doesn't say, "For God so loved straight people."
It doesn't say, "For God so loved law-abiding people."
It doesn't say, "For God so loved spiritual people."
It says, "For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten son..."

In a moment, right after the choir sings "O Holy Night," I'll step behind the communion table and speak the same words that we say at Brick Church whenever we celebrate the sacrament: "Jesus said: 'Come unto me, all you that are weary and heavily burdened, and I will give you rest.'" Then I'll say, "Friends, this is the Lord's table. It belongs to no one church or denomination. In this place, all, **all**, who would but put their trust in Christ are invited to the table."

The point of that little innkeeper who made up a new line, the point of that Brick Church communion invitation, the point of the Gospel of Jesus Christ is *just exactly that*: There *is* plenty of room, room for you, and for me. In fact, Christ the Host, the One who presides at the table before you, has been waiting, saving a place. It matters not who you are or are not. It matters not what you have done or not done. There is only one thing that is needful: that you stand up and walk forward, and movement by which you answer the invitation. That movement of your body silently declares your readiness to trust the One who has invited you. You may not have all your theological "t's" crossed or your religious "i's" dotted. Your faith may be a struggle or it may be easy. Indeed, all faith is on the road; all faith is incomplete and *en route*, never arrived and finished. One thing only is needful, that you are ready to trust him, accept the invitation, rise, and come on in.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.