

Third Sunday of Advent
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Pageant Theme

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Room In the Inn?

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Since those of you who worship at this hour will miss the Christmas Pageant held during the second service, I thought I'd tell the story of Las Posadas. It derives from a largely Mexican and Spanish tradition that has taken shape over the last 400 years or so, which tells of the quest of the Holy Family for a place to stay when they travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem days before the birth of Jesus.

In the name of heaven I ask you for shelter,
for my beloved wife can go no farther.

This is not an inn! Get on with you!
I can't open the door; you might be some rascal.

These are the first two verses—translated into English—of a song for Las Posadas, a nine-day celebration of the Christmas story. Each night, a procession travels to a home or a shop that represents the inn at Bethlehem. The people in the procession sing to the people inside the house, asking to be let in; the people inside sing back: "Go away!" This exchange is repeated several times, until finally the inn-keeper realizes that this is Joseph and Mary at the door; he lets them in, and everyone shares food.

The inspiration for Las Posadas comes from a mere portion of a verse in Luke. Here's the full verse:

And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)

Then follows the familiar story of the shepherds and the angel — familiar even to many non-Christians, because Linus recites it in *A Charlie Brown Christmas*.

Of all of the points of view in this Nativity story — the point of view of Mary, of Joseph, of Jesus; the point of view of the shepherds, and of the sheep; the point of view of the angel who speaks to the shepherds, and of the host of subordinate angels who sing *Gloria in excelsis Deo* — of all of these points of view, which does the Posada celebration focus on? On that of the inn-keeper.

Here are more lines from the tradition of Las Posadas:

Joseph: Do not be inhuman; show some charity!
God in heaven will reward you.

Inn-keeper: Go now, I tell you, and don't bother us anymore!
Because if you make me angry I will beat you.

The Gospel of Matthew doesn't say anything about the inn or the stable or the manger. It does tell of King Herod, who was visited by wise men of the East. The wise men come to Jerusalem and tell Herod that they have seen a star signifying the birth of the King of the Jews. Herod asks his priests where this could possibly have happened, and the priests say that it was prophesied to happen in Bethlehem. So Herod sends the wise men off to Bethlehem, and asks them to come back and to tell him exactly where they find this King of the Jews.

But after the wise men find Jesus, and give him the famous gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh, they are warned by God in a dream not to tell Herod, because Herod would kill Jesus as a threat to his rule. The wise men avoid Jerusalem and go home without seeing Herod. Joseph, also warned in a dream, takes Mary and Jesus off to Egypt to lay low, and the family does not come back until years later, when Herod is dead.

So in this version of the Nativity story, Mary and Joseph are not simply travelers in need who want a place to stay and to give birth; no, in the Matthew story they are actually refugees from government oppression. More lines from Las Posadas:

We are worn out, we have come all the way from Nazareth.
I am a carpenter named Joseph.

Never mind your name, let me sleep!
I've already told you we won't open the door.

Consider the words of Emma Lazarus, words that are engraved in bronze at the base of the Statue of Liberty:

Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free, the wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me.

Emma Lazarus wrote these words in 1883. The previous year—the previous year—Congress passed the Chinese Exclusion Act, which was twice renewed, and not repealed until 1943. But it's not like immigrants were suddenly loved in 1943; just one

year earlier, President Roosevelt gave the executive order that authorized the relocation and incarceration of over a hundred thousand Japanese Americans, some immigrants, most the children and grandchildren of immigrants. It wasn't until 1988 that President Reagan signed into law the Civil Liberties Act that provided reparations to Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated during the war. In 1992, President George H.W. Bush said:

“No nation can fully understand itself or find its place in the world if it does not look with clear eyes at all the glories and disgraces of its past. We in the United States acknowledge such an injustice in our history. The internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry was a great injustice, and it will never be repeated.”

Can we honestly say that in these days? We are faced with refugees from any number of places. And much of the sentiment in our nation does not reflect that of the teaching of Las Posadas, nor even of the Statue of Liberty.

The Posada ritual ends with the inn-keeper opening the door:

Is that you, Joseph? And your wife Mary?
Enter pilgrims! I didn't recognize you.

He finally realizes that the people asking to be let in are important. But we know from our searching of scripture and the words of our Lord that all persons and all creatures are important.

The inn-keeper in the Gospel of Luke does not open his door. The inn-keeper in the Posada ritual does. We have to decide which version of the story we will live in. (adapted from “Room at the Inn,” Everett Howe)

Las Posadas reminds us that we are given in Advent an opportunity to welcome Christ into our lives. Those seeking welcome sing, in the voice of Joseph, “My wife is Mary, the queen of heaven, and is going to be the mother of the divine Word”, making clear that it is not just poor travelers who are seeking hospitality, but bearers of the divine presence. We are the innkeepers who may choose to overcome our sleepiness and suspicion in order to recognize that presence. God's grace is something we await and receive with joy. We expect and we prepare for a divine gift.

Las Posadas reminds us that not only may we choose to welcome God into our lives, but we are also confronted with the opportunity to receive others—strangers and refugees, as welcome guests!

Our faith of grace and hospitality teaches us that welcoming God and welcoming our neighbor are two sides of the same coin. Recognizing the presence of God in our neighbor leads us welcome that neighbor into our lives, and the sometimes chaotic re-

arranging of our lives brought about by the welcoming of new companions provides an opening for divine grace.

Let me repeat a quote from Martin Luther that I shared on Wednesday. It's from his 1543 Christmas sermon: "The inn was full... There are many of you who think to yourselves: 'If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the baby!' Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve your neighbor, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself."

Las Posadas is a playful improvisation on scripture that has a very serious message about hospitality. Knowing the plight of the Christ in our neighbor, we welcome the stranger. We open our homes, our borders, and our hearts to those in need.

I close with poetic words from Howard Thurman and Maya Angelou:

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the brothers,
to make music in the heart. [Thurman]

History, despite its wrenching pain
Cannot be unlived, but if faced
With courage, need not be lived again.
Lift up your eyes upon
The day breaking for you.
Give birth again
To the dream. (Angelou, from "On the Pulse of Morning")

Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord, unto abundant and eternal life. Amen.