

## Christmas Eve and Day 2017

The Rev. Fred Devall

On Saturday morning I sneaked out to get a last minute gift in a nearby shopping center on Metairie Road. People had descended into full-on hunter/gatherer mode. Horns honked, tires screeched, and tempers were tested as people tried to get parking spaces in short supply. There was no room, but cars kept piling in. Peace on earth, good will towards all; well maybe not. There was a serious disconnect between reason for the season and the behavior being exhibited. The chaos before my eyes was almost an undoing of God's creation in Genesis, where order is brought to bear and chaos is subdued. Yet here, in pursuit of the "Perfect Christmas" God's forces seemed to be on the run as chaos prevailed, if only for the day.

Each of us likely has in mind a picture of the elusive "Perfect Christmas". Most of these dreams contain visions of the Holy and Secular, the Sacred and the Profane, some blending of Jesus and our cultural practices. It seems each year, however, that Jesus continues to be further pushed to the edge of the scene. In a business sense, Jesus is losing market share to his competitors. Paradoxically, as consumer Christmas prevails, our collective joy is diminished; our craving is not satiated but instead increased. All for the "Perfect Christmas".

The late Charles Schulz captured this dilemma perfectly in "A Charlie Brown Christmas". You may recall that Charlie Brown landed the role of Director for the Christmas Play. As he tries to steer the play into a vision of joy, he comes into direct conflict with the rest of the gang who seem to be obsessed with commercialized Christmas. As everyone gets into the act, including his own dog, Charlie Brown loses hope that the real Christmas can be found in a sea of consumerism. All comes to a head as Charlie Brown returns from an expedition to find the perfect Christmas tree. He doesn't pick the "right" one but instead a tree that were it a dog would be called the runt of the litter. The other Peanuts characters ridicule Charlie Brown. In exasperation he asks, "Is there anyone who can tell me what Christmas is all about?" Linus is happy to answer his question. As lights are dimmed Linus remembers the original Christmas story as told us by St. Luke. "In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night..." He concludes, "That's what Christmas is all about Charlie Brown".

The characters of that first Christmas include the powerful, Emperor Augustus and Governor Quirinius. Also present are the marginal, Joseph and Mary. And we are introduced to heavenly characters, such as the angels and the earthly shepherds. A figure who captures the imagination is one who is not even named in the story. Yet he is inferred through the line, “And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). If there is an inn, then there must be an innkeeper.

The innkeeper can be looked at one of two ways, a shifty man without much concern for those who cannot pay, or as a compassionate person navigating an uncertain world. I prefer the latter. Here is a man who is not rich like Augustus. Nor is he poor like Mary and Joseph. He’s not angelic, but he does try to do the right thing. In this case making a stable into a nursery is a euphemism for creating a space for God. Had the innkeeper known that God was to be born in his stable, no doubt he would have kicked someone out of his room, but he didn’t know. Neither do we know how God will work through our lives.

Creating a space for God is very different than an all or nothing approach. The innkeeper does not become John the Baptist and forsake all materialism for the wilderness lifestyle. And rarely if ever do we. It can be very difficult to navigate our world. No doubt some of the people honking and cursing in the Metairie Road parking lot were in that moment by virtue of time constraints, and they were simply doing the best they could. Creating a space for Jesus does not require us to eliminate all commercialism, it simply calls us to prioritize, to place Jesus first.

In her book, *Faith at Home: A Handbook for Cautiously Christian Parents*, author Wendy Claire Barrie offers parents a tool to do just this, to place Jesus first, to make him the center of our lives. Research shows that the overwhelming influence on children’s religious future is not their priest, youth minister or Sunday School Teacher. As important as these figures are, it is parents who have the most influence on giving “their children a strong moral foundation rooted in God through Jesus” (back jacket cover). We do this by modeling a life of prayer—simple things like saying grace before meals, prayer when going to bed, using an Advent Wreath, sharing Evening Prayer when they get older. And keeping cool in the parking lot when everyone else is losing their religion.

Anyone can create a space for Jesus. Why do we tell the same story over and over again each year? Partly because we are a stubborn lot and forget that we can always begin again. We also tell the story to be reminded that God breaks into our world in the least likely of ways. God could have chosen to be born of the Emperor Augustus or Governor Quirinius, but he didn't. No God chose the underdog, the poor and the powerless to demonstrate his strength.

The sign that we are on the right path will not be an invitation to an exclusive party where we can rub elbows with the "in" crowd. No, we'll know we are creating space for God when we see the signs of his presence not in the powerful like Augustus and Quirinius but in the vulnerable like the baby Jesus, "This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger" (Luke 2:12). The perfect Christmas cannot be purchased, inherited, or acquired. It can, however, be received when we move Jesus from the edge to the center of our lives, when we create a space for God incarnate. *Amen.*