

Luke 2:1-20

Christmas Traditions

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It was fun to hear the children talk about the traditions they share with their families around Christmas time. When Christopher and Andrew still lived at home, Christmas Eve was a night filled with non-negotiable traditions. I shared with the children one of the traditions we had-making sure there was food on the lawn for Santa's reindeer. There were other traditions too. We always ate the same foods on Christmas Eve. New foods could be added to the spread, but none of the "regulars" could be left out. The boys received new pajamas every year on Christmas Eve as well. That was the one gift they opened on that night. We always watched *A Charlie Brown Christmas* and after that, *the DVD of a fire in the fireplace would play. We didn't have a fireplace while the boys were growing up.

It's been kind of fun as the boys have grown into adults to watch which traditions they have chosen to continue in their own homes. I've enjoyed listening in as Christopher and his wife talk about the right way to do Christmas. I remember the great Christmas movie debate. In my daughter-in-law's family, *A Muppet Christmas Carol* was the tradition on Christmas Eve. The horror! Of course, we know that it isn't so important which movie we watch, it's who we watch it with. Traditions connect us to specific times and places. They remind us that we belong to each other, and that we are not alone.

I believe feeling alone is one of the most painful things in life. I'm talking about those times when it seems like nobody understands what we are going through and maybe nobody even cares to try. I wonder if that's how Mary and Joseph felt as they trudged into Bethlehem that

night. I imagine them knocking on door after door, only to be told over and over again, "You can't stay here." When they finally arrived at the house where there was a little space for them, albeit not the honeymoon suite, they settled in for the night. It occurs to me that Mary was probably already in labor when they arrived in Bethlehem. It was her first baby, maybe she thought her back was hurting from the trip.

I bet it had been a long 9 months for couple. At the beginning there were visits from angels and Mary had a nice visit with Elizabeth, but other than that, she was pregnant like any other woman. I wonder if Mary and Joseph talked amongst themselves, wondering like, "When is the cool stuff going to start happening? We were told we would be bringing a very special human being into the world, so shouldn't some nifty things be happening?" And I'm certain Mary's idea of nifty was not giving birth in a stable, just she and Joseph...and some animals...and maybe a storm trooper. As she was wrapping Jesus up, did she look at Joseph and say, "Do you think we got it wrong? It doesn't seem like the promised one would come into the world like this. Nobody even cares that we had a baby. We are alone in this horrible place."

Mary and Joseph didn't know that, at about that time, the shepherds were having quite an experience. The shepherds, whom nobody paid much attention to normally, were in the midst of bright lights, angels, and the best new they had ever heard, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." Like Mary and like Joseph, the shepherds paid attention to the angels and went to Bethlehem to find that baby.

I wonder what it was like when the shepherds met Mary and Joseph, when they saw Jesus. Did the shepherds all start talking at once, telling the story of the bright light from the heavens and the glittery angels...I so badly want one of them to have started singing, Glo-ooo-ooo-ria! I want Mary to have thought it was okay for their dirty hands to pick Jesus up and pass him around. I want them to have kissed him on the cheek and said, "Welcome to the world." I think Mary and Joseph must have been so relieved. Someone else knew. They weren't alone any more. This ragtag bunch of shepherds knew what they knew. Something nifty and cool had finally happened. Jesus was born. And just like every other baby ever born, his life changed the world.

And tonight, we celebrate the possibility that we would allow the story of Jesus' birth to change us and to inspire us to change this world. We recognize that, even as the Advent season comes to a close, we are still a world waiting...not for the Christ Child to come, but for us. God is crying out to us in the voices at the border, calling us in the voices of the ones who don't have enough to eat or a place to live, shouting to us in the voices of the ones in prison...waiting for us to live out our faith, waiting for us to seek justice, waiting for us to pursue peace. The story of Jesus' birth is a beautiful story...and retelling it is an important tradition, but the tradition is without meaning if we don't allow it to draw us near to one another, to help us see the divine spark inside all of us.

So, as we gather around trees and stockings, wear new pajamas and watch Christmas movies...as we eat the things we always eat, let us not forget that what makes all of it meaningful is the people with whom we share them and the ways they remind us that we are loved and we are not alone.

Merry Christmas!