

A Stable Lamp is Lighted -- Epiphany 2A

As we move through this season called Epiphany, two thousand and more years since the event in Palestine that changed the world forever, one inescapable realization we cannot but revisit is the depth of our attachment to the stories themselves. We are mysteriously and repeatedly moved by the narratives that emerged from those long-ago days. Even as they grow older in linear time, and our awareness of the quirks and inconsistencies among historical reportage, cherished legend and sacred narrative grows, the stories themselves only get more powerful in their relevance to our daily lives and their ability to influence our inner worlds.

I want to share with you an extended image of the birth of Jesus. A friend has shared with me a book called *The Four Wise Men*, written not long ago by one Michael Tournier, about the swirl of wonder that came to light in those latter days. It's just a story. Or, it's just the story, told from the perspective of one donkey, who happened to be quartered in a stable, on a night that happened to be like no other. The burro speaks:

“But that night, there was no question of work. Some travelers who had been turned away from the inn had invaded our stable. I strongly suspected they wouldn’t leave us in peace for long. And sure enough, pretty soon a man and a woman came timidly into our cozy barn. The man was some kind of artisan. He had kicked up a big fuss, telling everyone who would listen that he had to register in Bethlehem for the census, because his family tree – twenty-seven generations no less – went back to King David himself,

who had been born there. Everybody laughed, either behind his back or right in his face. He'd have had more help in finding lodgings if he had mentioned the condition of his young wife, who seemed dead tired, and very pregnant besides. Taking straw from the floor and hay from our feeding troughs, he put together a thick pallet between the ox and me and there the young woman lay down to rest.

"Little by little, everybody found his place and the noise died down. Now and then the young woman moaned softly and that's how we found out her husband's name was Joseph. He comforted her as best he could, and that's how we found out her name was Mary. I don't know how many hours passed; I must have slept. When I woke up, I had a feeling that something significant was about to take place, not only in our passageway, but everywhere, even, so it seemed, in the sky, glittering tatters of which shone through our miserable roof. There was an air of excitement, expectation and wonder. The great silence of the longest night of the year had fallen on the Earth and it seemed as though, for fear of breaking the silence, the Earth had stopped the flow of all its waters and the heavens were holding their breath. Even the glowworms and fireflies masked their light. Nature had given way to a sacred eternity.

"Then suddenly, in less than an instant something enormous happened. An irrepressible thrill of joy traversed Heaven and Earth. There was a rustling of innumerable wings overhead. When we looked up, swarms of angelic messengers were rushing in all directions. The thatch over our heads was lit up by the dazzling trail of a comet. We heard the crystalline happiness of the brooks resume and

the majestic laughter of the rivers join in. In the desert of Judea, swirls of sand tickled the flanks of the dunes. An ovation rose from the terebinth forests and mingled with the muffled applause of hoot owls. Even the stars themselves exulted. All nature exulted.

“What had happened? Seemingly not much; hardly anything. A faint cry coming from the dark, warm pallet; a cry that could not have come from a man or a woman. It was the soft wailing of a newborn baby.

“A few days later, one of those wise fellows -- the one from Africa, thought about what he witnessed, how it was he knew so well that this experience was meant for him. He had paid enough attention to his dream not to let Herod the horrible king in on the whereabouts of this baby – the one they were calling Jesus. When they asked him: ‘And what did you find in Bethlehem,’ he replied: ‘An infant in the straw of a stable; the child none other than the incarnate God set down in the midst of poor humankind. The clouds had all dispersed and God had become visible in a child. The humblest daily life – those beasts, those implements, that stable were all bathed in eternity by a ray of light fallen from Heaven. You ask me what I found in Bethlehem. I found the image and likeness of God reconciled in humanity after such a long separation, I found the image regenerated, thanks to the rebirth of an underlying likeness.’ Sounds like a wise man to me. He continued:

‘The child in the crib became black when I saw it in order better to welcome me, Gaspar, an African King. There’s more in that than all the love stories I know. That beautiful image teaches us to become like those we love, to see with their

eyes, to speak in their mother tongues, to respect them, a word that originally meant to 'look at twice:' re-spect. When we are exalted like this, pleasure, joy and happiness fuse into love.'

"If you expect another to give you pleasure or joy, does it mean that you love them? No. You love only yourself. You want them to serve your self-love. True love is the pleasure you get from another's pleasure, the joy that rises up in you at the sight of his joy, the happiness it gives you to know that she is happy. Pleasure from pleasure, joy from joy, happiness from happiness – that is love, nothing more. That baby is God's desire to have us experience pleasure, wholeness, purpose, fulfillment. O that I could go out into the world and do likewise to all who cross my path." As C.S.Lewis observed, "At that birth, there and then only in all time the myth became fact; the Word, flesh; God, Man. This is not 'a religion', nor 'a philosophy.' It is the summing up and actuality of them all."

So, who can duly appreciate that greater Love which opens the high gates of heaven to us prodigals; most of us brought in kicking, struggling, resentful, and darting our eyes in every direction for a chance of escape? The words *compelle intrare*, 'compel them to come in,' uttered by Jesus by way of inviting one and all to the great feast, have been so abused by wicked men that we shudder at them. From early centuries through medieval times and beyond, the Church leaned on a horribly twisted interpretation of *compelle intrare*, found in Luke 14:23. Governments had the right to coerce people into church. Church and state were so tied

together that the former could dictate the latter use deadly force against anyone who resisted, or even objected.

“But, properly understood,” continues Lewis, the words “...plumb the depth of the Divine mercy. The hardness of God is kinder than the softness of man, and His compulsion is our liberation.” So, we absorb and give way to them; and we encounter joy. If we are paying attention, if we shut our mouths and open our eyes and ears, that birth becomes our central story, along with the saga that follows. If we take in what is there and give no thought to what might have been there or what might be somewhere else, we will realize how the true training for and practice of anything whatever that is good in this life will always help us in our formation as true and simple Christians.