

Christmas Eve
December 24, 2013
The Rev. Robert H. Malm

“...no place...”

We know this story so well. Yet each Christmas certain details from Luke’s Gospel can jump out and capture our attention. This year the detail that fascinates me is Luke explaining why the baby Jesus was placed in a manger “*because there was no place for them in the inn.*” No place, no room, not even any floor space in whatever primitive lodging was available to travelers passing through the tiny village of Bethlehem in the first century. In fact the word “inn” can also be translated “guest room.”

Included in our decorations is the crèche, the scene of the stable with the baby in the manger, with the parents and the animals. Later come angels, shepherds, Kings and the star. At our first Eucharist tonight (5:00 PM), I carry baby Jesus into the Church and place him in the manger and, then, I bless the crèche. We know where Jesus was born and we know why he was born in a stable.

The world never seems to have a place for God; there’s no room for God’s love; no place for God’s justice, for God’s peace. A recent poll reports that 50% of those celebrating Christmas in the United States do not view Christmas as a religious holiday!

Last Sunday and for the final days of Advent we have prayed for Jesus to come and “*find in us a mansion prepared for himself.*” These ancient words reflect the willingness of Mary and Joseph to become Jesus’ parents. They said “yes” to God. So we are asked every Christmas if there is room in our hearts and souls for Jesus. Is there a place for Jesus in our world? How does his birth change our lives?

Later tonight we will sing those beautiful words written by Phillips Brooks,

*How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!
So God imparts to human hearts the blessings of his heaven.
No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin,
Where meek souls will receive him still, the dear Christ enters in.*

(Hymnal 78, verse 3)

Brooks graduated from the Virginia Theological Seminary in 1859, just two years before the Civil War began. He served parishes in Philadelphia; and, after the war ended in 1865, he travelled to the Holy Land and visited Bethlehem. Three years later he wrote this Christmas carol. Brooks must have hoped that Jesus’ love would enter into the hearts and souls of all in this nation to heal the wounds of war and division.

This rejection, this turning away, this “*no place*” for you here; we all know, we all experience. We wonder if we will be accepted. Will we be included? Will there be a place for us? Will we know love? Will we find peace? Will we live in hope? One commentator calls this detail from Luke’s Gospel “*an eternal parable of the human soul.*”

Mary and Joseph found an unexpected place for shelter. Even when our plans, our expectations, our hopes change dramatically, God is with us, in the unexpected, the surprising. In the darkness, there is a ray of God's light.

Jesus' birth, his Incarnation, transforms a rejecting world. God will not take "no" for an answer. The angels announce this transformation. Shepherds witness the miracle. Luke ends the nativity narrative by telling us, "*The child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom and the favor of God was upon him.*" (2:40)

Of course, the story seems to end about 30 years later with another rejection, an execution. The crowd shouts, "*Crucify him. Crucify him.*" (Luke 23:21) "*We have no King by Caesar.*" (John 14:15) There seems to be no place for a Messiah in Israel.

The story does not end with rejection; it ends with transformation, with the Incarnate Word being planted by the power of the Spirit working through men and women in every place, in every corner of this world. Incarnation means transformation. Christmas leads to Easter and Easter leads to eternity, heaven and earth joined by the everlasting birth of love, love that changes lives, love that changes the world.

Recently I have discovered the writings of a poet who last summer joined the faculty at Yale Divinity School. Christian Wiman grew up in a strict Southern Baptist family in Texas. He came to college here in Virginia at Washington and Lee. He decided to be a poet, a professional writer. He also decided to leave Christianity and the Church behind.

Ten years ago, at the age of 37, he became the editor of a prestigious poetry magazine. There was no place for God in his life, so he thought. Even though his work at the magazine seemed to be going well, he fell into despair; he couldn't write. Reflecting back on this time in his life, Wiman writes that he was "*gazing into the abyss...*"

Two transformative events led him from the abyss to a newborn faith. First, he fell in love and married. And, then, less than a year later, he was diagnosed with an incurable, life-threatening cancer at the age of 39. Soon he and his wife began praying before meals at home. Then he went to church for the first time in more than 20 years.

Wiman writes about this transformation, this incarnation, this new birth,

*I was brought up with the poisonous notion that you had to renounce love of the earth in order to receive the love of God. My experience has been just the opposite; a love of the earth and existence so overflowing that it implied or included or even absolutely demanded, God. Love did not deliver me from the earth but into it...this is life beyond the moment...this is hope...*¹

Wiman's faith is found in the Incarnation, the physical existence of God in Jesus. God can be found in every place, in everything, in all of life, even in pain and suffering. Wiman believes, "*joy is the overflowing consciousness of reality...*"²

There is no greater reality than human birth, human life, human death; the "overflowing consciousness" of God enters this world through a stable. Jesus' birth transforms "*no place*" to

¹ The American Scholar (website); essays – Summer 2007 – "Gazing Into the Abyss."

² Ibid.

“every place.” Or as we like to proclaim at the start of Holy Communion, we can know God “at all times and in all places...”

Christmas is the celebration of God transforming the world’s “no”; transforming the dark, despairing place of rejection. Christian Wiman’s life story shows us one of God’s transforming miracles. God takes the soiled stables of our hearts and transforms them into holy shrines of divine love.

Perhaps it is in the unexpected, the surprising places of life where we can discover new birth, new life. When all we hear is the roar of “no”, there may come the still small voice from God saying “yes.” Wiman has discovered this “yes” in the incarnate reality of love and in a life-threatening disease. He had a bone marrow transplant some months ago and has now survived cancer for eight years. The journey is not over. There will be more stables, more “no’s,” for all of us. There are broken, torn apart, “riven” places found within all the beauty God has given us.

In one of Wiman’s poems I see and I hear the reality and the mystery of the Incarnation; Jesus born in a stable because there is no place in the inn.

*God goes, belonging to every riven thing he's made
sing his being simply by being
the thing it is:*

*stone and tree and sky,
man who sees and sings and wonders why*

*God goes. Belonging, to every riven thing he's made,
means a storm of peace.*

*Think of the atoms inside the stone.
Think of the man who sits alone
trying to will himself into a stillness where*

*God goes belonging. To every riven thing he's made
there is given one shade
shaped exactly to the thing itself:
under the tree a darker tree;
under the man the only man to see*

*God goes belonging to every riven thing. He's made
the things that bring him near,
made the mind that makes him go.
A part of what man knows,
apart from what man knows,*

*God goes belonging to every riven thing he's made.³ **

Isaiah 9:2-4, 6-7
Titus 2:11-14
Luke 2:1-20

³ Wiman, Christian. *Every Riven Thing*, Copyright © 2010 by Christian Wiman. Used by permission of Farrar, Straus and Giroux, LLC.

* See also the interview in *Christianity Today* posted on website 12/7/2012.