

The Sunnybrook Pulpit

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“We all have stories,” writes James Orbinski, the Canadian who led Doctors Without Borders. “We find ourselves in [our stories], make ourselves in them, choose ourselves in them. If we are the stories we tell ourselves, we had better choose them well.” [*An Imperfect Offering*, p. 4] Stories like the ones we hear on Christmas Eve can provide us with direction, not a map, but a compass.

To understand the story of the birth of Jesus, you have to read it alongside another story, the story Emperor Augustus told about his own birth, a story that is more propaganda than history, but it seems to have been effective propaganda, because Augustus was emperor for 45 years. Augustus claimed to have been conceived miraculously by the god Apollo. He was, he claimed, the son of a god, and therefore his rule was not tyranny, but destiny. Augustus also claimed the titles of Saviour and Lord.

But empires concentrate power in the hands of a very few people, and the rest often live in deep poverty and oppression. The symbol of an empire is a pyramid, because at the very top you have a very few people, while most of the people live at the bottom.

And the peasants of first century Palestine were at the bottom. For them, the economic boom meant little, as crushing taxes deprived them of what little they had, and political stability just meant freedom for their rulers to exploit them mercilessly. They did not experience peace, but a brutal occupation. It was not difficult for them to see through the propaganda of empire. They knew they needed a different story as a compass by which to make life’s journey. They rejected the story of empire and sought a saviour who would be for all people, not just some.

The stories about Jesus’ birth offered a profound and beautiful alternative to Roman imperial propaganda. In saying that a virgin conceived Jesus, the Christmas stories echo the story of Augustus’ birth and make it clear that the way of Jesus is an alternative to the way of the empire. In applying the titles of Saviour and Lord to Jesus, they reject imperial propaganda. If Jesus is Lord, then the emperor isn’t. If Jesus is the Son of God, then the emperor can’t be. If Jesus is Saviour, then the emperor most assuredly is not. While emperors seek peace through victory, the story of Jesus says that real peace will only be achieved through a just sharing of

the earth's gifts. While emperors seek security through fear, the story of Jesus says that real security is found through sacrificial service. While emperors flaunt their success as a sign of divine blessing, the story of Jesus tells of God coming to birth among the ordinary and impoverished. It should be no surprise that the forces of empire soon recognized the subversive nature of the Christian story and began feeding Christians to the lions.

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The Christmas stories are not history, but stories. They belong to an ancient Jewish tradition of *haggadah*, stories told and retold creatively in ways that illuminate the essential truths of what it means to live in God's world. That is why Matthew and Luke, in the gospels, tell such different stories about the birth of Jesus. And in response to that creativity, I thought I would share with you this evening, my own contribution to that storytelling tradition. I made up this story, out of my own imagination. I tell it partly out of the joy of storytelling, and I hope you experience some joy and laughter in the telling. But I also tell it as a way of sharing the good news of Christmas, and I hope you recognize through this story that that good news is for you. I call this "The Innkeeper's Story," (and it might help you understand it if you imagine it spoken in the accent of a hillbilly from the southern U.S.A.).

The Innkeeper's Story

*"I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people:
to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.
This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth
and lying in a manger." - Luke 2:1-20*

We've been operating the BB&B, the Bethlehem Bed & Breakfast, me and the wife, for about ten years. I wanted to call it "The Holiday Inn," you know, but the wife said it would never catch on, so we ended up with the Bethlehem Bed & Breakfast, the BB&B. It ain't much, just an extra room we built onto the house, some mats on the floor, but travelers generally ain't fussy, and there are times we've packed ten people into that room, sleeping so close that they show up in each other's dreams - at least that's what the grumpy ones say. It's been good for us. With the extra money, we bought a milking goat and two sheep!

The biggest problem is what the wife calls “fluid management.” The wife, I calls her “She Who Must Be Obeyed” when she ain’t listening, came up with a solution to that: We don’t give them nothing to drink after supper, and make sure they visit the backhouse before they bed down, or we none of us get any sleep. It just takes one of them having to get up to water the cactus, if you know what I mean, stumbling over the others, and they all start moaning and swearing and whacking each other, and then our little ones wake up and start squalling and we’re all awake for an hour and a half. And then we’re just getting back to sleep and the next minute, the next guy thinks the cactus is getting thirsty! We all sleep much better when we are strict about “fluid management.”

That’s what it was like, that night of the census: Crowded! Bethlehem is a place a lot of people call home, but even more people are from here. Lots of people leave here looking for a better life, but not many settle here for the same reason. So when there is a holiday, or a census, all the people whose pappies or grand-pappies are from here come back, and the place gets pretty crowded. All the extra rooms get filled up. Don’t tell nobody, but that’s when we rake in the big money, charge two or three times what we do usually, and people happy to pay it, as crowded as things are.

We had a full house that night: there was me, She Who Must Be Obeyed, and our seven kids in our room, plus ten in the spare room. Fortunately, we didn’t have any extra animals in the courtyard. People don’t generally bring sheep or goats or donkeys along on a census. They don’t want the tax man to know any more than necessary about their flocks and property.

I weren’t too pleased about the Galilean couple showing up looking for a room, I can tell you. For one thing we don’t see too many women travelling. They stay home, for the most part. And having a couple travelling makes life complicated. The BB&B works pretty well when you put ten men in a room, but you can’t put a woman into a room with ten men. We aren’t quite set up for couples, let alone when they are in a family way.

And did I mention they were from Galilee? Galileans are strange folk, you know. They don’t talk quite right, and you have to listen real careful. Sometimes it’s hard to tell they are even speaking the language. Plus they got strange ideas about all kinds of things. They’re backward, don’t you know, peasants from the back hills,

every one. And they're uppity. They cause trouble. Lots of the Sicarii, the terrorists who attack the Roman soldiers, are from Galilee. And every time one of them gets it in his head to stir up trouble, the Romans take it out on all of us. Sometimes all it takes is a little Galilean spark, and Boom, a whole lot of innocent Judeans end up on crosses. Not all Galileans are terrorists of course, but it only takes one. Most of us just wish they'd stay home.

So when this couple show up, I wasn't going to let them in. "Why encourage them?" I thought. "We let one in, and they'll all want to come!" Plus, where would we put them? But She Who Must Be Obeyed, you know, had her own ideas, and said we could put them in the courtyard where we shut up the milking goat and the two sheep at night. I thought that was a dumb idea, and said so. But she got that look in her eye, the one that says, "Either they sleep in the courtyard, or you do!" When she gets that look, she must be obeyed.

There was a time that night when we was all sorry. Fluid management was working fine, but the woman, she starts moaning and groaning, and pretty soon the young'uns were all worked up, and you could hear the guys in the spare room pulling out the dice, knowing they weren't getting any sleep anytime soon. I could tell they were all, everyone, going to be wanting their money back come morning.

She Who Must Be Obeyed sent me for the midwife, and the women did what women do in these situations, and a few hours later, we heard things come to a conclusion, and the baby cry, and things finally started to settle down. I was pretty crabby, by this time, I can tell you. I been through it seven times with my own kids, and I weren't too happy about having to go through it again with some dirty Galileans. "At Laaast," I thought, we can all go back to sleep.

I hadn't counted on the shepherds. As if Galileans weren't enough, now we got shepherds knocking on the door! Galileans may be odd, but at least they smell okay. "Never stand downwind of a shepherd," my pappy always said, and for good reason. It was still hours before dawn and these shepherds come knocking spouting some wild stuff about angels and the Messiah, and good news for all people, and to look for a baby swaddled tight and lying in a manger. Well I almost slammed the door on them. Who ever heard of such nonsense? The Messiah, the King of the Jews, would be born in a palace, not to a couple of Galileans in the BB&B. And I'd seen too much of the world to think that any king was going to be

good news for the likes of me. Plus, I sure didn't want to be in no enclosed space with no shepherds! But She Who Must Be Obeyed gave me another of those looks, and I let them in. I hadn't actually seen the baby before then, but there he was, swaddled up tight and lying in the manger, just like the shepherds said.

"This can't be," I says. "Messiahs don't get born in places like this," I says. "If this is the way it happens," I says, "then everything I know about God and kings and shepherds and Galileans is all upside down. I will have to relearn everything!"

And She Who Must Be Obeyed, she gives me one of her looks and says, "Exactly! Exactly!"