According to Luke, the story of our savior’s birth begins with two transients trying to find a place to spend the night, a couple without a place to go, who were in desperate need. The young woman was about to have a baby, and no one would let them have a room. Obviously, Joseph and Mary didn’t have the money or status necessary to secure any special favors. The best they could do was to find shelter in a place where animals were kept.

Now I know that in pious legends, an innkeeper’s wife helped the couple out by letting them use her barn. But the scriptures say nothing about this. My guess is that Mary and Joseph found this place after searching out their surroundings, much as the homeless in our cities do – seeking out places under bridges or in doorways that provide a little shelter from the wind and cold.

And while we do our best to make our nativity scenes beautiful, the truth is that Mary gave birth to Jesus among the straw, dirt, and other stuff that is usually found in places where animals are kept. And the only thing they had to use for a crib was an animal’s feeding trough. While we do our best to beautify this blessed event with songs and decorations, the truth is that there was nothing pretty about the conditions of our savior’s birth. It was an event that took place on life’s fringes, and involved those who were in some sense forsaken. And it seems this was no accident.

The reason I say this is that the first people to be told about the savior’s birth were shepherds. Now, in our day it’s difficult to get the real significance of this because over the centuries we have softened and romanticized the notion of what a shepherd was in the time of Jesus. We are used to seeing pictures of handsome, clean, shepherd boys with angelic faces, holding little lambs over their shoulders. In fact, we have just such a figure on our hutch at home. It’s lovely.

But while it’s true that the great King David himself had been a shepherd, and used this image to speak of God – that is, as the ideal shepherd who tends his sheep and leads them to green pastures – in everyday life during the time of Jesus – especially in towns and cities -- shepherds were not viewed in this way. Instead, shepherds would have been described by most as dirty, irreverent, field dwellers, who smelled like sheep and whose social standing wasn’t much higher than the sheep they tended.

Shepherds lived on the edges of society as perhaps migrant workers who spend their days laboring in the fields do today. Many people looked on shepherds with distrust and most never looked on them at all. Like Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, they really didn’t have much of a place among the people. They were considered by most to be of no account. Yet they were the ones who received the announcement of the savior’s birth. And since angels were sent to them for this specific purpose, obviously it was no accident.

In Matthews telling of the story we have something similar in the visit of the magi. Again, we have turned them into attractive figures. But among the Jews, they were looked upon as foreigners -- idolaters, who relied on their astronomical calculations to discern the meaning of things rather than on God. Though they were truly noble, learned men, at that time and place, they would have been viewed as many people in our country view Muslims today – that is, as unwelcome outsiders, who had no business being there.

So what are we to make of the fact that the savior’s birth took place on the fringes of society, and was announced to those who were ignored, forsaken, or looked down upon by those in the main stream of life? Well, surely it must mean that God is concerned with such people, that his outreach to humankind is directed to the lifting up of the lowly, the struggling, the demonized, and the disregarded.

And what does this mean for those of us who are gathered here to celebrate the birth of Christ? Well, there are a couple things that jump out at me immediately. First, if we truly receive this Christ whose birth we celebrate, if he is the one in whom we place our faith and seek to follow, then we too will have a special regard for the poor, the disadvantaged, the homeless, the foreigner – for those who live on the fringes of society and are struggling to survive.
As God reached into the lives of such people through the announcement of the savior’s birth, so we will find ways to reach into their lives too. We will reach out to them in ways that will help them see that they are loved by God, and that we truly care about them. We will help them recognize God’s intention to lift them up and bring them to fullness of life. We will do this by the respectful ways we speak to them and by the things we do to make life better for them. If we haven’t heard this challenge extended to us through the Christmas story, then we really haven’t heard the story.

But along with the challenge there is also great comfort to be found in this story. For the truth is that most all of us will find ourselves floundering on the fringes of life at some time. And it can happen in any number of ways.

It happened for me many years ago about this time of year when I went through a period of unemployment. For about six months I hung around on the edges of life. I felt the humiliation of not being able to provide well for my family, of no longer being able to do the things that most families around us were doing, because we didn’t have the money. I had difficulty engaging in normal conversations, or in our usual social activities because my situation made others, and especially me, feel so uncomfortable. It’s not that people were unkind to me or treated me with disdain. Like Mary and Joseph, sometimes it’s just the circumstances themselves that push us to the place where we feel we don’t belong.

If it’s not the loss of a job that does this, it could be a move to a new place where we feel lonely and unwelcome; it could be a bout with depression that leaves us feeling misunderstood and looked upon by others as damaged goods; it could be a divorce that leaves us feeling shunned or at least socially awkward; or it could be a serious illness that leaves us feeling as though people are afraid to be in our company any longer. Any number of things can push us to the edges of life where we will feel unned, unwanted, or worse.

The good news of Christmas is that while we may come to a place in life where we will feel unwanted by some, we can never come to a place where we are unwanted by God. We can never move so far to the edges of life that God cannot reach us. We can never fall so far that God cannot lift us up. Christ was born to a poor, transient couple in Bethlehem and announced to shepherds so we would know that no matter where we find ourselves in life, God is with us and for us, and is working to bring us to a place of peace and fulfillment.

And so we won’t forget this, he gives himself to us in the Eucharist. The same newborn savior that was placed in a feeding trough continues to feed us through this special gift of his loving presence. So not only at Christmas, but each time we come forward to receive the Eucharist, we make a pilgrimage to the manger, where once again Christ gives himself to us as heavenly food, so that we will know that he truly is with us always.

Fr. Rod Damico
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