



E-MANUAL



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ENRICHING OUR CHRISTMAS TRADITIONS

(Luke 2:1-7)

by Timothy J. Geddert, PhD.

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submitted by Pastor Chris Becker

Christmas is a time where traditions become important. We sing traditional Christmas songs. We enjoy the family traditions we have inherited from our childhood or developed in our own families. And we retell the old, old Christmas story that never changes. We read the story, perhaps we recite it, or maybe (as in our family) we act it out.

We relive with Mary and Joseph the long, grueling trip to Bethlehem that was just a bit much for a nine-month-pregnant woman and led to a short labor and delivery on the night of their arrival in Bethlehem. We respond with astonishment once more that the arriving king is not born in a palace, not even in a house or a hotel room, but in a barn. His first bed is a feeding trough! We hear the angels' message, run with the shepherds to

see, ponder with Mary . . . in short, we relive the old story that never changes. We try to make the traditions come alive and we supplement them with traditions of our own – traditions about trees and gifts and guests and Christmas dinners and lots of things that are designed to make Christmas special, but often make it a dizzying cycle of busy activity and stressed nerves. Right?

Perhaps we have also developed some traditions that don't really enrich our Christmas celebrating. I think about some of those as I reflect on Christmases past. Do you remember last year's celebration? I don't know how your celebration was, but if you will permit me to be a bit tongue-in-cheek, let me describe a typical Christmas.

For months people think about it, worry about it, plan for it, and save for it. Around the beginning of December, visible evidences of the coming of Christmas begin to appear. Huge advertisements appear in the malls. Decorations are mounted on light poles. Hubbies complain that they have to risk their lives on the stepladder again, as they mount strings of lights to the rain gutters. (Why can't their wives do it this year? Equality cuts both ways, doesn't it?)

Christmas trees are sold all over the city and they soon appear in living rooms, all dressed up with tinsel, lights and ornaments. And then it's time to start buying gifts. With that begins the great Christmas competition – competition over who can find parking spots, who can squeeze into already crowded stores, who can sneak a few places forward in the checkout lines, competition over which store sells the most, which parents buy the most, which children get the most. People stock up on candies, nuts and turkey. Countless hours are spent cooking and baking and working overtime to pay for it all.

As the great day gets closer the pace quickens. People get more tense and touchy. Mom complains about all the banquets that have to be prepared; Dad complains that the family gatherings are getting too huge and expensive; kids complain that they're not allowed to open their gifts on the twenty-third already. People travel hundreds of miles to fulfill obligations to their families. They come home late, tired and grumpy. People overeat on Christmas turkey; some over drink on Christmas cheer. Christmas comes with a big splash, and if we're not careful, that splash washes out our best laid plans for a nice, quiet, meaningful Christmas.

And then come the after Christmas blues – you know, exchanging all those gifts that don't fit or were of little value anyway, taking down the decorations, cleaning up the tree, not to mention cleaning up all those new toys that are always lying around, perhaps already broken, on the living room floor. Slowly Christmas fades away, and everyone breathes a sigh of relief. That was Christmas! Well, maybe not quite. But maybe it's not that far off, either.

So what can we do? Well, we could try to boycott Christmas – just not do all the things that make the season so hectic and often so empty. We could try to live without a tree; after all, there wasn't a decorated tree in the stable, was there? And we could try to live without banquets and feasts; after all, the shepherds were probably eating barley bread and maybe some dried fish on those hillsides. And gifts: well, why not just think of some good gift certificates, pass them around and consider it taken care of? And who needs Christmas cards? We don't really need to visit our relatives, do we? . . . Well, I assume you're as skeptical about this solution as I am.

No, if things are going to be different, the difference will need to take place on the inside, not on all the trimmings. A meaningful Christmas will depend far more on our inner attitude than on the external events that mark the season.

I want to make a radical suggestion. I want to suggest that we reexamine Luke's account of Christmas and re-image what took place on that

first Christmas night. I don't mean invent a new story. I mean take the Bible very seriously, but fill in the gaps differently than we are accustomed to doing.

Or have you never noticed how much of the Christmas story we actually make up with our own imaginations?

- How many wise men were there? Who knows? The Bible doesn't tell us . . . so we make it 3! You know, standardize it, so we can create the right number of figures for the Christmas display.



- And which animals were there in the stable? Who knows? The Bible doesn't tell us . . . so we make it an ox and an ass. You know, "Ox and ass before him bow and he is in the manger now." O yes, the little shepherd boy was carrying a lamb with him, wasn't he? I never could figure out how he carried the lamb and played his little drum at the same time.

- And we use great imagination on the evil innkeeper. He's the bad guy in the story. Whole Sunday school plays center on his opportunism (taking advantage of market conditions to quadruple his rates), his callous blindness (not recognizing the coming of the Lord of Glory), his hard-heartedness (not even finding room for an expecting couple) and his economic chauvinism. Poor carpenters just didn't cut it; you had to be a Roman census official or a respected Jewish leader to find a room in his hotel on that busy night.

And so on and so on. We just fill in the details of the story. We use our imaginations to round out the bare details that Luke and Matthew have supplied. In fact, when we use our imaginations, we often imagine things that we are convinced did not happen. The Bible says the wise men came to a house and the shepherds came to a manger. But it fits better under the tree if we just put them all together.

And even though most people are convinced that the wise men came considerably later (after all, Herod tried to kill all the babies 2 years and younger and it took a long time to travel from the far east) we just put that star right up there and let

it shine on the manger scene on the very first Christmas night.

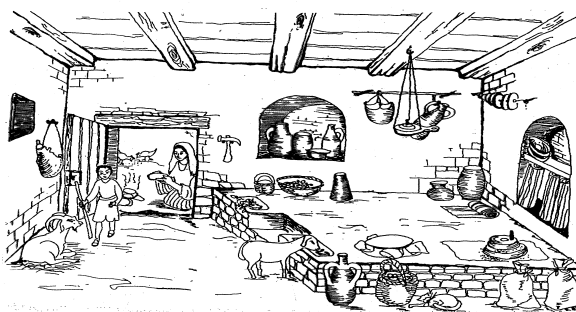
And having created our images of Bethlehem, we let the story challenge us – challenge us to be as peaceful and calm as the shepherds on the hillside, as filled with worship and praise as the angels, as generous as the wise men, as contemplative as Mary, obedient as Joseph.

It's a beautiful story, this one we've filled in for ourselves, no matter how probable or improbable our imaginations are – well, beautiful except for that old innkeeper. But we need him as our scapegoat. After all, the larger than life “good guys” in the story leave us with an impossible ideal. One thing comforts us: at least we aren't as bad as the innkeeper!

I suggested before that we re-image the Christmas story – that we imagine it having happened just a little differently than we usually do. I want to suggest a way of re-telling that story. It begins with the question, “How did the innkeeper get into our story?”

Well, we get the idea of the innkeeper from the mention of the inn. “No room in the inn” must mean that some innkeeper didn't make room. But the story in Luke doesn't actually refer to an inn either – not in the original language at least. When Luke said, “There was no room in the inn,” he used a word that could mean “inn”, but almost never does. It almost always means “guestroom.”

The word used is *kataluma*, a word used exactly three times in the Bible – once here in Luke 2 where we usually translate it “inn”. The other two occurrences are in Luke 22 and Mark 14. In both of those cases, it refers to the room in which Jesus had the Last Supper with his disciples, and they certainly did not go to an inn! They were in a room that is clearly described by Luke as a “large upper room.” It is a large guestroom built on the top of a normal house. That is where most Jewish homes would build their guestroom, their *kataluma*.



So if the word clearly means “guestroom on top of a house” in 2 of the 3 occurrences in the Bible, it's likely that it means this in Luke 2 as well.

Elsewhere in the same book Luke, using a different word, refers to an inn. And in that connection he refers to an actual innkeeper. Where does he do this? In the parable of the Good Samaritan. The Good Samaritan takes the injured man to an inn – not a guestroom in a house – and the word used is *pandocheion*. He even calls the innkeeper by the corresponding title: the *pandocheus*.

So what does all this mean for our understanding of the Christmas story? Well, taking into account the way Luke uses the words *kataluma* and *pandocheion*, it's likely that in Luke's Christmas story the text actually says, “They laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the guestroom.” The baby Jesus was laid in a manger because the guestroom on top of the house was already occupied by other guests!

I can imagine you saying, “Inn, guestroom – what's the difference? They're both places to sleep, and who cares if Joseph and Mary had to go to the barn because the inn was full, or because the guestroom was full? It all comes out the same, doesn't it?” Well, here is where everything gets interesting. With a closer reading of the text, there is more that disappears from the story than just the inn – and of course with it the evil innkeeper. There is no stable either. Check your Bibles. Do they mention a stable? Nope.

“But,” we protest, “there must have been a stable. There was a manger and a manger means a stable.” Not necessarily. Evidence from all over the Old and New Testaments shows that a typical first-century Palestinian manger was not to be

found in a stable, i.e. a separate building made just for animals. It was to be found in the living room of the family's large, one-room split-level house. The typical Palestinian peasant's house was one large room under a flat roof. It was built with two floor levels, an upper

level where the family lived, ate and slept, and a lower level where the animals normally spent the night (and then of course there might be a guestroom on the roof!)

So where was the manger? In the most logical place in such a house: built into the floor of the living area, right next to the lower level where the animals were kept. That way the animals could stand in their lower level and eat hay from the manger built into the floor of the higher level. A typical manger was in the living room of a house. What does that do to the Christmas story? Now not only the innkeeper and his inn disappear, but the stable does as well. When Luke 2 says, “They wrapped the baby in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the kataluma,” it isn’t saying, “They had to go to the barn because the innkeeper was too hard-hearted to make a room available for the holy couple.” Rather it’s saying, “They were taken right into the living room, because the guestroom was already full.”

The story is not about a full hotel, an evil innkeeper and the cold, dark barn. It is about a typical Palestinian house – one that made room for the holy couple, even though the guestroom was already occupied by other friends or relatives crowding into Bethlehem for the census.

If this way of reading the text is correct, what do we gain, and what do we lose?

Well, this way of reading the story actually saves us a lot of trouble. It actually makes more sense of what we read in the Bible. We don’t have to imagine that Jesus was born on the very night that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem. The way Luke tells the story, it sounds rather as though she spent the last weeks or months of her pregnancy there. We don’t have to wonder how Mary, who has relatives in the hill-country of Judea, and Joseph, who is a native son of the village, can’t find a single family (let alone one of their many relatives) who will take them in for the night, or for a week, or perhaps for the last months of Mary’s pregnancy. We’ve had to imagine Mary and Joseph arriving the night of Jesus’ birth in order to explain why they couldn’t find a decent

place to sleep. With this new reading we are also saved the bother of wondering why the shepherds entered Bethlehem, only to leave the town again to look for a barn.

Best of all, we don’t have to invent a new house that the family moved to after Jesus’ birth, but before the wise men arrived. After all, if the shepherds came to a manger and the wise men to a house, they must have moved in the meantime – at least the way we usually read the story. But with this new reading, they’re in the same house all the time!

And that means there is no trouble believing that the wise men and the shepherds all gathered together to worship Jesus – rich and poor, Jew and Gentile – worshiping the one born to be King. And we can even imagine that the star leading the wise men to the place Jesus lay shone over the house not months later, but on that first Christmas night!

And so, instead of re-imagining the story in such a way that we have to throw away all our manger scenes, we actually find a story that makes appropriate even those parts that we thought didn’t quite represent what actually happened. After all, there was still a manger and there were still animals, and we could actually argue that this means there really was a stable, even if it was part of the house!

The only thing we really lose is the evil innkeeper – our scapegoat. But then, maybe we can find better motivations for enjoying a meaningful Christmas than staying a couple steps ahead of that old scrooge.

In my opinion, with the new way of reading Luke 2 we gain far more than we lose. We lose our scapegoat, the evil innkeeper. But we gain a wonderful picture of what it really meant for Jesus to come down from heaven to join humanity – a picture of God coming down to identify with common folks like you and me, coming down right where we are, being born in a normal home like all the other babies in Bethlehem. There were probably any number of babies enjoying the soft hay of mangers in the living rooms of other crowded homes in Bethlehem that year.

So what does this all say about our Christmas celebrating? I referred to the reliving of the old Christmas story that never changes. Well, its essence never changes, but a little creative imagination might change some of the ways we think about it.

If our Christmas celebrating is going to be meaningful, it will be that mostly because of what happens to us on the inside as we celebrate the season. A new reading of the text suggests a whole new internal motivation and spiritual resource for celebrating Christmas differently.

It challenges us to open our own living rooms for Jesus, making room for him not in the barn, not in the inn, but in our living rooms, right where the family lives, where the pets roam, where we work and sleep and play and eat – even when our homes are packed full of guests. If a home in Bethlehem could make room for Jesus in the hustle and bustle of census time, surely we can do it in the hustle and bustle of the Christmas season.

This year I don't want to imagine Jesus lying out in a barn while we prepare our Christmas celebrations and go through the activities of the season. And I don't want to limit the worship part of Christmas to a few reverent trips out to that stable – you know, once or twice during church services and maybe Christmas Eve or Christmas Morning before we open gifts.

Rather I want to imagine Jesus living in our house as we celebrate. I want to imagine him going shopping with me and helping me be kind to the people in the crowded stores. I want to imagine him helping me choose appropriate gifts to express love to those around me. I want to imagine him joining me in the kitchen as I prepare part of our family meal. I want to imagine him present – not out there in the barn. After all, they called him Emmanuel, God with us – with us not only on Christmas Eve and Christmas Morning, but through all the hustle and bustle of the season.

Seen with new eyes, Luke's Christmas account can bring to this season the significance and meaning that gifts and decorations and festivities often cannot bring.



Transmogrification

by Kim Becker

This is a painting I did several years ago. It is oil on canvas and measures 36" by 48". People who see this large painting in my house for the first time often ask what it means. I thought I would share this piece with you because this seemingly chaotic work of art is very meaningful to me. The title of this painting, Transmogrification, means "to transform, especially in a surprising or magical manner." In my life I have seen God transform me in some very surprising ways. I am constantly amazed by God and how he works outside of what I expect. This painting is about spiritual transformation. It represents inner change, and the emergence of a new Self. It is about being vulnerable and allowing others to see what was hidden inside. It is about God, working in me, and bringing out my best self. Thanks for letting me share this with you.



Dear Emmanuel Mennonite Church,

Thank you so much for your support at my ordination service, and for the beautiful drum, it looks AND sounds fantastic!

Peace,
Adam Harder Nussbaum