**Christmas is Risky Business**

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It’s perhaps one of the most peaceful, idyllic scenes ever written about. After all, it came upon a midnight clear. Surrounded by the quiet hush of the night –

“How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given.”

“Silent night, holy night, all was calm, all was bright.”

It is true. It was “away in a manger, no crib for a bed.”

Even so, “where he lay,

the little Lord Jesus was asleep in the hay.”

It’s also true that there were animals around.

“The cattle were lowing, the baby awakes.”

And even though “lowing” is the deep, ordinary vocalization of a cow, it sounds so much more respectful and considerate than the brass mooing

that they could have been doing.

All the same, “the baby awakes,

but little Lord Jesus, no crying he makes.

So there you have it.

It was a quiet clear night with the warmth of glowing stars

and the calming sounds of the deep night silence that could have been the sound of angelic voices.

Perhaps a shepherd or two as they watch over their sleeping flock with an occasional respectful cow lowing with the rhythm of a lullaby.

And a baby who chooses not to break the silence with crying, but takes it all in where he sat –

the quiet joy of a couple becoming family.

Does it get any more peaceful, or idyllic than that?

It makes for great Christmas cards and hymns,

but it probably belies the truth that lies within

that first Christmas night.

Remember, the only reason that Mary and Joseph got any shelter at all, probably, was because of her pregnant state.

There was no room in the inn. They were late.

Because of the decree to be registered for the census, there were a lot of travelers looking for accommodation. The scene was probably not a quiet, peaceful respite. It probably more closely resembled the mall the day before Christmas, everyone doing their last minute shopping – the bumping, the jostling, the maneuvering

to find your place, to find your space.

And while it’s true there was no designated place for birth,

the time that Jesus came to earth,

like hospitals and birthing rooms with special care,

I doubt Mary envisioned she would be there.

In a barn, in a cave.

I’ve had that experience, life in a barn. Perhaps you have too.

We raised Black Angus on our gentleman’s farm.

The cattle didn’t low, it was a definite moo.

And you must stay alert, for the gentle beasts intended no harm,

but they did desire the grain you brought to their manger,

and if you did not look out you could be in danger.

In their eagerness to get to the grain and the feed, you could easily get trample or pinned by the 800 pound mass.

And they wouldn’t think anything differently of you than a fly on their…behind.

And the reason there’s hay, on which Jesus could lay

is because animals don’t discriminate on where they eliminate.

The hay can absorb what drops on the floor.

Easier to rake and pitch out the door,

when it is time to clean.

This was the scene.

So maybe not so quite, not so serene.

And have you ever witnessed a birth where the mother and/or child did not scream.

Holy night, this we believe.

Silent night? Are we so naïve?

So why is it, you might ask, that I want to ruin this beloved story, of peace on earth.

“O little town of Bethlehem how still we see the lie; above thy deep and dreamless sleep, the silent starts go by.”

I yearn for that quiet, reflective repose

as much as anyone, I suppose.

But the glory of the story that we rehearse this night, is not that Jesus comes to us among the peace and calm.

The stable is not a fable. It is where we live.

It is loud, it is dangerous, it is messy, it is scary.

It is not where we choose to be.

Nor was it the choice of Joseph and Mary.

But that is what’s special about this night.

It’s in this disorder that God brings his light.

Christmas is risky business.

God doesn’t play it safe.

There are no guarantees when a mother gives birth.

The pain is acute and the labor can be long,

but we don’t hear about that in our story and song.

We don’t hear of the fear that is in Joseph’s heart,

I know that it’s there ‘cause that was my part,

and the part of any person who tastes the elixir of joy and fear as they watch the one they love bring forth life.

Silent night, holy night, and perhaps just a night trying to survive.

Can you imagine the thankful hearts of Mary and Joseph?

A baby, in their arms, alive.

They could use a little rest now. A little time alone.

Except they’re in a stable and not at their home.

So there are the shepherds and sheep and the stink of the stall.

The obligatory angles singing for all.

Christmas is a risky business.

Why did God choose birth? Living beyond infancy is not a guarantee.

Even in the modern world there are countries where infant mortality

approaches one in ten.

It wasn’t any better back then.

Jesus is safe for now, but he’ll be in danger again.

It doesn’t take long before the story moves on,

and we hear of three kings and the gifts that they bring.

If the Shepherds in fields and the angels that hover,

didn’t blow the young saviors cover,

these three gift bearers unbeknownst what they did,

almost supplied Herod with the gift of Christ’s head.

And while the young, holy family escaped with a dream.

Others were left to hear children scream.

Why is that story written, what good does it do,

except that was your life if you were a Jew.

Don’t test the powers that be. Don’t mock the powers of oppression.

They are not afraid to hurt and destroy to teach you a lesson.

Christmas is risky business because that is exactly its mission –

to tell the world’s powers you do not have permission,

nor the kind of control you think you posses to wreak havoc, unabated, on God’s good creation.

God will take charge, but not from above. He incarnates the divine and arms him with love. Not a warrior on steed, or a monarch of greed.

Not with hate or derision, or spite or revenge,

these are the kinds of things he’d like to end.

Christmas is a risky business.

The story of the hour is not one of power.

Could God reveal himself with any more vulnerability?

It is so counter intuitive.

But tonight, that is exactly what we celebrate. God so desires to be a part of who we are that God will not wait for us to come to him, but will come to us,

as one of us,

in spite of us,

to live with us,

to walk with us,

to laugh with us,

to cry with us,

to mourn with us,

to rejoice with us,

in all of our messiness.

That is why this is a silent night, a holy night,

where all is calm and all is bright.

Not because we live in a perfect world

free of violence, disease, hurt, grief.

But because we know that God risks all that God is,

that in this burden of life we might find some relief.

To find that way, that road, that path,

where love is the king and conquers all wrath.

Where strangers are friends and countries adore,

not only their rich but especially their poor.

Where the weak can grow strong

And the outcasts come in

That is where God whishes love to begin

Christmas is risky business, because there is no guarantee

That we will accept this gift God gives you and me.

And yet, here we are. Are you ready to receive?

What God wishes to give you on this Christmas Eve?

The wind of the world whirls wildly about

But this light does not flicker, nor can it blow out

This light is God’s love, uniquely come down,

To this little hamlet of Bethlehem town.

And continues to come to each home and each hearth

But this is the place our searching must start

In the Bethlehem stable found in your heart.

Silent night, holy night, all is calm all is bright

It’s risky business what we do here this night

To trust in a baby to make all things right

But here is the mystery and you know that it’s true,

Love is more powerful than all we can do.

And this is the night we celebrate Love’s birth

And celebrate God risking coming to earth.

So rejoice my friends, and shout with delight

Be filled with God’s love and glow with God’s light.

Merry Christmas!