

Christmas Day 2021

John 1:1-18

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church, Manasquan, NJ

I don't spend time on TikTok except when friends or family members forward something to me. Earlier this week my daughter sent me "The Queue to See Baby Jesus," and I watched it. A comedian named Adrian Bliss plays an angel-slash-bouncer with a clipboard granting or denying admission to the stable to see Baby Jesus. He also plays all the other parts in this little skit, including an ox (or bull?) who lives in the stable but exited, and is now standing in line to get back in. The angel announces to those who are waiting, "No paintings, please" (like a present-day "No photos!") The ox is now first in line and says to the angel, "Hey, sorry, just popping back in." The angel asks him, "Have you brought a gift for the Baby?" "Uh, no." "I'm afraid there's no entry without a gift for the Baby." "I don't care about the baby." "What?" "This is my house." "Yeah, but it's a private event tonight." "I've come from in there. I just popped out for some air." "Well, you haven't got a stamp." "Yeah, because I was already in there!" "That's just not possible." "I live there!" "I'm afraid for security reasons I'm going to have to ask you to leave the line." "Look, everyone, if you haven't got a gift for the Baby, you're not getting in!" Pretty silly, which is why it's so funny, although the visuals really make it.

A gift for the Baby.... When we're children, most of our focus is on what we'll **get**, not what we'll **give** for Christmas. I remember one Advent when we gave the Sunday Schoolers a little empty manger and a bag of straw. For every loving deed they performed, every sacrifice they made for somebody else, they could put one piece of straw in the manger. The hope was that by Christmas they would have prepared a crib for the Baby Jesus, nicely cushioned with kindnesses.

We know well the story of the gifts given by the Magi, the Wise Men from the East: royal, vastly expensive gifts of gold, frankincense, myrrh. Maybe the gifts the shepherds brought are more within our price range. Scripture doesn't inventory those gifts, but human imagination has, in Christmas carols for instance:

Little baby
Pa rum pum pum pum
I am a poor boy too
Pa rum pum pum pum

I have no gift to bring...
That's fit to give our king...
Shall I play for you
Pa rum pum pum pum...

Mary nodded...
The ox and lamb kept time...
I played my drum for him
Pa rum pum pum pum....
I played my best for him...
Then he smiled at me
Pa rum pum pum pum
Me and my drum.

There's also the poinsettia legend about a little shepherd, who unlike his friends had no piece of silvery mica, no pretty bird's nest, no piece of bread, to take to the Baby in the manger. Out of desperation, he uproots a little plant growing along the path. It looks just pitiful to him, which makes him very sad; his tears fall and wet the little sprig. When he presents it to the Baby in the manger, it's still damp. He's looking in awe at the Baby, who looks back at the little shepherd, then at the gift he's brought, bringing a smile to the Baby's face, because now there's a beautiful red flower where the tears had fallen. And so the poinsettia was born out of a child's desire to give the Christ Child a gift worthy of Him.

You'll have noticed that our Gospel for Christmas Day didn't mention Bethlehem, Mary & Joseph, the birth in a stable, angels filling the air with Glorias or shepherds racing to see the newborn Messiah. St. John starts way further back, before the Birth of Jesus, before

the birth of time as we know it, echoing the beginning of Genesis: *“In the beginning....”*

(Genesis 1:1)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it... The Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth... No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known. (John 1:1-5, 14, 18)

And so it is our Lord Jesus Christ, the Babe of Bethlehem, who is the best, the premier, the superlative, unmatched Gift Given. Recognizing and loving this living Gift that **God** gives **us** is the most important thing of all about Christmas. An Australian writer named Pam Brown put it this way:

We expect too much at Christmas.
It's got to be magical. It's got to go right.
Feasting. Fun. The perfect present.
All that anticipation. Take it easy.
Love's the thing. The rest is tinsel.¹

“Love's the thing.” One more tale about shepherds, traditionally told in the Provence section of France. The story goes that there were 4 shepherds who raced off after the angels left to find the stable and see the Baby. Three of them were bearing gifts to nourish the Holy Family: eggs, wine, cheese and bread. Those three yakked it up with Mary & Joseph, carrying on an enthusiastic conversation, finishing with the offer to help out in any way they could, going forward. Time to leave, except the 4th shepherd was AWOL. They hunted around without success and finally peeked around a cloth that had been hung from the rafters to protect the baby from cold drafts. There was the fourth shepherd, kneeling in awe before the manger, almost levitating with joy. In his reflection “Shipwrecked at the Stable,” Brennan Manning writes:

Like a flag or a flame taking the direction of the wind, he had taken the direction of love. Throughout the entire night, he stayed in adoration, whispering, “Jesu, Jesu, Jesu – Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.”²

The 4th little shepherd is traditionally named L’Enchante, and His worshiping, love-saturated presence is his gift to the One St. Paul refers to as “God’s indescribable gift.” (2 Corinthians 9:15)

Our presence here this morning, our worship of the One who is the Word, who comes in the Word and in the Sacraments, who gives His Body & Blood, is our heartfelt gift to God’s Gift Given. When we leave this sanctuary (or when we go forth from our homes, if you’re watching virtually), then our true honoring of the Savior born in Bethlehem is to see and serve Him in the last, the lost, the least. For He said, “Whenever you do it to one of the least of these, who are members of My family, you do it to Me.” (Matt. 25:40) That’s a priceless gift that can’t be wrapped. Do that and when you come to the stable and the angel asks, “Have you got a gift for the Baby?” you can say yes!

¹365 *Inspirational Thoughts For Women By Women*. (Siloam Springs, AZ: Dayspring.)

²Found in *Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas* (Walden, NY: Plough Publishing, 2001), 192.

Pastor Mary Virginia Farnham