

CHRISTMAS, 2011

There is a very quiet player in the birth stories of Jesus. It goes unnoticed for its part, but needs our attention—the stable!

As we move through life there are always friendly places and hostile and/or painful spaces. A geographical location is never neutral, without meaning for human beings. Local places like Jack Trice Stadium and Hilton Coliseum take on almost mythical and, quite possibly, almost sacred auras in the memories of alumni and die hard Iowa State fans. Adults have memories of Christmases or other holidays in the homes of their childhood or holiday gatherings in the homes of grandparents or other close friends that, when consciously brought to mind, are as real as if they were taking place today. Images of the burning and collapsing Twin Towers of the World Trade Center in New York City and the smoking gaping gash in the Pentagon in Washington D.C. on September 11, 2001 still elicit strong feelings a decade later. Space matters. Space communicates. It reaches out and touches our inner person and it seeks to be touched within its own richness.

The stable at Bethlehem speaks to us through the event that touched its soil. It was never significant in itself (it was merely a place for the overflow to bed down for the night); but once again at Christmas we recall it was the place embraced by the gracious hand of God. The love and goodness of God was revealed in this particular place on our earth. .

Bethlehem was not a pleasant place for Mary and Joseph. They were burdened by a foreign power that demanded that they return to their village or origin to be registered for taxation purposes. The stable where they were sent “because there was no room in the inn” is a place of poverty and vulnerability. It was a barn with all the sights, sounds, and smells associated with it. The time and place were a very fearful experience where Mary and Joseph would have felt all the weaknesses of being human and being economically and politically poor.

As we stop again this Christmas at the stable, we need to be touched by the vulnerability and poverty of Joseph and Mary as she gave birth to Jesus. We cannot really hear the story unless we hear it on the road making a despised journey. The story of Mary and Joseph and the stable must be joined to all other human beings today who also are forced to flee their war-torn countries, or have been pushed off their small farms and must move to the large cities and search for employment or who have been kicked out of their once secure homes because of foreclosure, unemployment, or other factors that have rendered them homeless and hopeless and now knock at our doors seeking hospitality and shelter as we sing our lullabies once again to the Christ Child and of the star that shone that night.

However, this unknown and lowly spot on earth is where God embraces all that is human in complete love and involvement a little over two thousand years ago in history and again today in spirit. The hand and heart of God make the stable in Bethlehem warm and inviting. The stable underlines the choice that God again is making of humanity, of each of us! This is where God draws close to us. In a world where so many are rejected as unwanted and of lesser importance to humanity, or in our own moments of desperation, the stable shouts God's unconditional choice of every human being.

In the opening chapter of the Gospel of John we hear this startling statement: "he pitched his tent among them (Jn 1:14)." The stable of Bethlehem is not just a physical location on a map of a time long ago. Then, as now, it is a symbol of the primary place in which God wishes to be found--our hearts, our flesh! In Jesus God is pitching his tent amidst us! We are the stable! Wherever we reach out in love to care for another human being no matter how small, unimportant, powerless, or find these emotions within us—there is the stable! Here we touch and are touched by the Christ is still dwelling among us!

Christmas blessings to all of you!