

A Stable Lamp is Lighted -- Epiphany 2A

As we move through the season called Epiphany, two thousand and more years since the events that changed our world forever, one inescapable realization we cannot but revisit is the depth of our attachment to the stories themselves. We are mysteriously and repeatedly moved by the narratives that emerged from those long-ago events. Even as they grow older in linear time, and our awareness of the quirks and inconsistencies among historical reportage, cherished legend and sacred narrative grows, the stories themselves only get more powerful in their relevance to our daily lives and their ability to influence our inner worlds.

I want to share with you an extended image of the birth of Jesus. A friend has shared with me a book called *The Four Wise Men*, written not long ago by one Michael Tournier, about the swirl of wonder that came to light in those latter days. It's just a story. Or, it's just the story, told from the perspective of one donkey, who happened to be quartered in a stable, on a night that happened to be like no other:

“But that night, there was no question of work. Some travelers who had been turned away from the inn had invaded our stable. I strongly suspected they wouldn't leave us in peace for long. And sure enough, pretty soon a man and a woman came into our cozy barn. The man was some kind of artisan. He had kicked up a big fuss, telling everyone who would listen that he had to register in Bethlehem for the census, because his family tree – twenty-seven generations no less – went back to King David

himself, who had been born there. Everybody laughed, either behind his back or right in his face. He'd have had more help in finding lodging if he had mentioned the condition of his young wife, who seemed dead tired, and very pregnant besides. Taking straw from the floor and hay from our feeding troughs, he put together a thick pallet between the ox and me and there the young woman lay down to rest.

Little by little, everybody found his place and the noise died down. Now and then the young woman moaned softly and that's how we found out her husband's name was Joseph. He comforted her as best he could, and that's how we found out her name was Mary. I don't know how many hours passed; I must have slept. When I woke up, I had a feeling that something significant was about to take place, not only in our passageway, but everywhere, even, so it seemed, in the sky, glittering tatters of which shone through our miserable roof. There was an air of excitement, expectation and wonder. The great silence of the longest night of the year had fallen on the Earth and it seemed as though, for fear of breaking the silence, the Earth had stopped the flow of all its waters and the heavens were holding their breath. Even the glowworms and fireflies masked their light. Nature had given way to a sacred eternity.

Then suddenly, in less than an instant something enormous happened. An irrepressible thrill of joy traversed Heaven and Earth. There was a rustling of innumerable wings overhead. When we looked up, we could see swarms of angelic messengers were rushing in all directions. The thatch over our heads was lit up by the dazzling trail of a

comet. We heard the crystalline happiness of the brooks and the majestic laughter of the rivers. In the desert of Judea, swirls of sand tickled the flanks of the dunes. An ovation rose from the terebinth forests and mingles with the muffled applause of hoot owls. Even the stars themselves exulted. All nature exulted.

What had happened? Seemingly not much; hardly anything. A faint cry coming from the dark, warm pallet; a cry that could not have come from a man or a woman. It was the soft wailing of a newborn babe. Just then, a great column of light shone down in the middle of the stable: the Archangel Gabriel had arrived.

A few days later, one of those wise fellows -- the one from Africa -- who had paid enough attention to his dream not to let horrid Herod the horrible king in on the whereabouts of this baby -- the one they were calling Jesus -- thought about what he witnessed, how it was he knew so well that this experience was meant for him. When they asked him: "And what did you find in Bethlehe/" Here was his reply: "An infant in the straw of a stable...the child none other than the incarnate God set down in the midst of poor humankind... The clouds had all dispersed and God had become visible in a child. The humblest daily life -- those beasts, those implements, that stable bathed in eternity by a ray of light fallen from Heaven... You ask me what I found in Bethlehem. I found the image and likeness of God reconciled after such a long separation, I found the image regenerated, thanks to the rebirth of an underlying likeness.

“The child in the crib became black when I saw it in order better to welcome me, Gaspar, an African King. There’s more in that than all the love stories I know. That beautiful image teaches us to become like those we love, to see with their eyes, to speak in their mother tongues, to respect them, a word that originally meant to ‘look at twice.’ When thus exalted, pleasure, joy and happiness fuse into love.

“If you expect another to give you pleasure or joy, does it mean that you love them? No. You love only yourself. You want them to serve your self-love. True love is the pleasure you get from another’s pleasure, the joy that rises up in you at the sight of his joy, the happiness it gives you to know that she is happy. Pleasure from pleasure, joy from joy, happiness from happiness – that is love, nothing more. That baby is God’s desire to have us experience pleasure, wholeness, purpose, fulfillment. O that I could go out into the world and do likewise to all who cross my path.”