

Jesus in the Manger: A Story of Transformation

Richard Rohr, O.F.M.

The question for us is always “how can we turn information into transformation?” How can we use the sacred texts to lead people into new places with God, with life, with themselves? This is surely true with our Lucan texts on the birth of Jesus. They have largely been sentimentalized in Christmas card fashion. We enjoy such “Christmas cards”, yet they don’t really change our lives in any substantive way.

We do have an amazing piece of information here: Our Jesus story says that “She wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7). This is an amazing and daring picture for the beginning of Jesus’ life amidst the human. It re-situates us in terms of class, cosmos, and the fallibility of human judgment. Soon we will find ourselves looking in disordered places for life, and soon we will know that death can hide inside of social order.

An untransformed mind writing a story of God would surely have the Christ born in a palace, among nobility or even royalty. The birth would be spectacular, not sordid. It would demand respect instead of inviting confusion. Only a transformed mind would write such a text as this, and only transformed (or eccentric) people would allow the text into the sacred canon. Maybe it is not surprising that we find it in only one of the four Gospels.

What might Luke, what might the Spirit, be trying to say to us through such an infancy narrative? First of all, it is questioning most of our political and social assumptions. Truth and goodness are not always found at the top, but often on the edge and at the bottom, and truth is not always the headline but probably on the back page. Not in the center of empire, but in the backwaters of Bethlehem. Not among the established, but clearly among those who are dis-established. A rough and risky beginning is the chosen path of God.

Next, this entire infancy narrative has the capacity to awaken awe and mystery. It does not answer questions. It raises them. It leads us into liminality, where things remain deliberately unsettled, ambiguous, and therefore inviting to new places. That is exactly what a truly sacred text should do, although we no longer are very comfortable with sacred texts. We live after the enlightenment and the scientific revolutions. We now expect answers more than awe, conclusions more than connections. We want religious magic more than religious meaning.

The listening soul is invited to “abide” inside such a text and struggle for deeper meanings. Why would goodness be marginalized? Is that its inevitable fate? Is God saying that vulnerability is, in fact, the preferred starting place and stance in this world? None of us would freely choose to live at the bottom or in what Dorothy Day called “precarity”. The text subverts all we believe about power, prestige and possessions.

Lest anyone miss the point, we start “the human life of God” with images of homelessness, refugees, exclusion, poverty, helplessness, and maybe discrimination. Two peasants at the mercy of the demands of empire. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus are mere statistics, and not subjects of their own destiny. They are not “in control of their lives” as we love to idealize today. The holy family is bereft of the benefits of citizenship. It will set the stage for a later affirmation in Ephesians of a different social order that can now emerge: “you are no longer aliens or foreign visitors, but you are citizens with all the saints and part of God’s household” (2:19). This resituates the soul outside of the usual system of rewards and punishments. It hints of a new

freedom, a freedom that we who idealize Mary and Joseph do not even want. The Reference Point has now changed.

Although the text never speaks of ox and ass and animals in a stable, one wonders why this staging has almost universally been accepted and pictured? Many say this intuition finds foundation in the opening verses of Isaiah where the people of Judah and Jerusalem are judged less perceptive than the animals: "The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib, but Israel knows nothing, my people understands nothing" (1:3). We have hints here of a larger ecology. Nature and animals seem to participate in Being naturally and without resistance. They give glory to God by being who they are without question or critique. We are the only members of the Great Chain of Being who resist and resent what is. We are the only unwilling players in this new drama of Incarnation. Not only do the angelic hosts recognize the new integration of heaven and earth(2:14), but somehow the shepherds who were a class outside of social respect (Malina & Rohrbaugh), lowly earth bound animals, and even the straw of a feeding trough all receive him graciously.

I cannot help but think that Luke had access to the following passage from the Book of Wisdom in writing his lovely account of the birth of Jesus:

"Like all the others, I too am a mortal man,
Descendent of the first being fashioned from the earth,
I was modeled in flesh within my mother's womb,
For ten months taking shape in her blood,
By means of virile seed and pleasure, sleep's companion.
I too when I was born, drew in the common air,
I fell on the same ground that bears us all,
A wail my first sound, as like all the rest.
I was nurtured in swaddling clothes, with every care,
No king has known any other beginning of existence.
For all there is one way only into the world, as out of it".
Wisdom 7:1-6

I suspect we have chosen to dismiss this text primarily for the same reason that we have sentimentalized-and therefore forgotten-the infancy narrative itself. It emphasizes similarity. It comes from unitive experience. We have for too long been reading sacred texts from our dualistic consciousness, split from the very mystery that the story of the birth of Jesus seeks to reveal.