

The Inn

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church
in Fremont, California,
on December 24, 2021, by the Rev. Brenda Loreman.

Scripture: Luke 2:1-7

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A few years ago, a couple in Ohio got into some trouble because of the nativity set they put up in their front yard. Lots of people put up outdoor nativities—that wasn't the problem. It was the unusual characteristics of this nativity that received the focus of ire from the local zoning commission and neighborhood churches. This nativity was a zombie nativity, with all the usual stable characters portrayed as blood-drooling zombies, even the baby Jesus. Some people thought it was irreverently fun and creative, and some people thought it was the devil's work.¹

A zombie nativity might seem extreme, but the nativity has always been open for interpretation into all sorts of forms that are outside of tradition. For example, you can purchase a rubber ducky nativity, or an Irish-themed nativity, or (my favorite) put together your own nerdy nativity from your science-fiction action figures. If you're a fan of the movie *Love, Actually*, you might recall that various sea creatures, like a whale, a lobster, and an octopus were present in the school nativity play.

My guess is the strictly traditional Christians who took issue with the zombie nativity would have problems with these nativities as well. They would probably like us to only display “traditional” nativities, with a properly radiant Mary, a glowing infant Jesus, and an adoring Joseph, shepherds, magi, and angels, all in a rustic wooden stable surrounded by domestic farm animals.

The problem is, this “traditional” nativity is not a reflection of the biblical accounts of the birth of Jesus as told in the gospels of Luke and Matthew. If you read carefully the passages from Luke that tell the nativity story, you might have noticed that there is no mention of a stable. No farm animals. No angels at the birth—they appear to the shepherds out in the fields. The only part of the “traditional” nativity setting that is mentioned in Luke's gospel is the manger.

Displaying the “traditional” nativity that we know and love is not something that arose in the days of early Christianity. Instead, it came from the creative imagination of St. Francis of Assisi, who purportedly created a live nativity as a backdrop to a Christmas sermon he gave in 1223. The practice spread across Europe, and then around the world. Francis, and those who followed in his footsteps, imagined the nativity using the scenery and people and animals that were familiar to them in medieval Europe.

But if Francis had done a deeper textual analysis of the gospel's text, he would have realized that there was no stable. And if he been at all familiar with the culture and architecture of first-century middle eastern homes, he would have known that Jesus was not born in a barn. Luke's gospel does not tell us exactly where Jesus was born, just that he was laid in a manger, because

¹ Jonathan Merrit, “Your Nativity Scene Is a Lie,” *The Atlantic*, December 13, 2015.
<https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/12/christmas-nativity-scene-flaws/419634/>

there was no room in the inn. Because a manger—then as now—is a trough or box for animal feed, we assume that the manger was in a stable, where farm animals live. But this likely was not the case.

When Luke tells us that “there was no place for them in the inn,”² the Greek word that he uses is *kataluma*. *Kataluma* is not a word that means a “commercial establishment that provides shelter for strangers.”³ The meaning of *kataluma* is closer to what we would call a “guest room.” In other words, Mary and Joseph were not turned away from a full commercial inn, but instead were unable to stay in the guest room of the house where they found shelter that night.

In the first century, a traditional middle eastern home would be “split-level.” On the lower level would be a living space for cooking and eating and working at one end, and at the other would be space for animals to be fed and bedded safely for the night. Up a short flight of stairs would be an upper room for sleeping, as well as some storage. This would be the space offered to guests who came to stay, while the family would sleep in the lower level.

According to Luke’s gospel, Joseph’s family is from Bethlehem, and it is likely that he had many relatives still living there. Because they were of modest means, it is unlikely that Joseph and Mary would have planned to stay in a commercial inn. Family ties would have made it inconceivable for them to do so. And middle eastern practices of hospitality would have meant that no family would have turned away guests who came seeking shelter, even if the guestroom were full. And so Mary and Joseph had their baby in the living room, laying the infant Jesus in the safest and most practical furniture available in the space—the manger full of hay for the animals.

By telling you all this, I’m not suggesting that we throw out our treasured nativities, whether they be traditional, or whimsical or irreverently creative. I treasure the nativities that I have collected over the years, even though I know that they do not reflect the reality of the world that Jesus was born into. But remembering that Jesus was born in the heart of the home, not outside in the cold, but welcomed right in the middle of the life of a family, surrounded by cousins and aunts and uncles and grandparents and children, makes me realize where we need to place the infant Jesus in our own lives.

My prayer for us this Christmas—and all through the year—is that we will practice the ancient ritual of hospitality and welcome. May our doors be opened wide. May our homes, our hearts, our very lives become a house for the Holy. Amen.

² Luke 2:7, NRSV.

³ Ken E Bailey, “The Manger and the Inn: A Middle Eastern view of the birth story of Jesus,” *Presbyterian Outlook*, December 21, 2006. <https://pres-outlook.org/2006/12/the-manger-and-the-inn-a-middle-eastern-view-of-the-birth-story-of-jesus/>.