CHRISTMAS EVE, 2017

NO! WAIT!
YOU CAN HAVE MY ROOM

Some say that Christmas is for children. I think so, too, but only because children can lead us into the deeper meaning of the Feast. Seven-year-old Bobby came running into the house yelling, “Mommy I’m gonna be an actor!” Gasping for breath, he went on: “My teacher wants me to be the innkeeper.” Seeing Bobby’s excitement, his mother said: “How wonderful! I’m happy to hear my little Bobby is going to be an actor. What’s the play?” “It’s about Jesus being born at Christmas,” he hurriedly added. “I’m gonna be the innkeeper.” His mother asked him, “Do you have any words to say as the innkeeper?” “It’s easy Mommy, really easy,” he responded, sitting at the kitchen table. “I just tell Mary and Joseph when they come that there’s no room at this inn for you.” Pausing for a minute, he added, “And then they go away.”

During the following weeks, Bobby practiced his lines religiously. “There’s no room at this inn for you,” he said repeatedly. Bobby was anxious that he might forget them or forget where he was to stand on stage. He wanted to get everything exactly right. After all, this was his debut as an actor, and everybody would be watching him. The big day arrived. It was a week before Christmas. The Christmas trees were all lighted in the school and around town. Christmas carols were heard everywhere people went. Bobby’s parents, other students’ parents, relatives, friends and all the students from the entire elementary school were in the auditorium waiting for the play to start.

The curtain went up, and the show began. Everything was going smoothly; Mary and Joseph were searching frantically looking for a place to stay. No place was found for them. Bobby’s big moment was approaching. He watched Mary and Joseph as they struggled walking across the stage toward his inn. They looked tired. Joseph was holding on to Mary as they walked toward Bobby. With an exhausted look on her face, Mary peered into Bobby’s eyes as Joseph asked: “Is there any room at your inn for us? My wife, Mary, is about to have our first child. We are excited, but Mary is so tired; she can barely stand.” Bobby kept staring at Mary. And then, taking a deep breath, Bobby said his line: “No, there’s no room at this inn for you.” Saddened, Joseph turned, putting his arm around Mary’s shoulders. Slowly they walked away, followed by the gaze of the little Innkeeper.

Bobby is suddenly swept up in the story; his heart is filled with compassion. Realizing the impact of his words, he started to whimper. After a few seconds, he began to cry. Running after Mary and Joseph, he startled himself, the couple and the entire audience by yelling, “Wait! Please come back. You can have my room.” Reaching
Joseph and Mary, Bobby hugged them. Spontaneously the audience stood up and applauded. It wasn’t the ending everyone expected, but it certainly was one everybody seemed to want.

What Bobby did is exactly what God the Father hoped for when he sent his son to be born on that first Christmas morn. He wanted his son to be an inviting presence. The Father wanted Jesus to be accepted, embraced and loved exactly the way Bobby did when he heard the reality of his words. When face to face with God’s love, everyone loves back. By his coming into the world — by Jesus’ birth, life, death and resurrection -- God wrote a different sort of ending for our lives — just as Bobby did.

If only we could let go of our fears and hesitations, take off our masks and let our inner light shine through. What a different world would be ours — a world of spontaneity and surprise, a world of honesty and truth, a world where role-playing takes second place to soul-sharing. In the Incarnation Jesus takes on our human nature, and offers us an example of the authentic life, a life lived freely, a life lived for others. In him we have the assurance that Light will conquer the darkness. Love will never be overcome by hatred. Falsehood must give way to truth and integrity. The words of Jesus are fulfilled: Unless you become like a little child, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven.

As we listen to the story of Jesus’ birth from the gospel of Luke and his description, it’s important to notice that the gospel writer doesn’t dazzle us with grand descriptive details. How bright was this shining glory of the Lord? Luke doesn’t say. What did the angels look like? Luke is silent. How many were there? Luke declines to count them. What exactly were those angels doing as they filled the sky with song? Luke has no comment. What expression was on the face of the newborn savior? Luke says nothing. It’s as if Luke pulls our attention away from the events themselves. He would have us focus instead on something else, namely, the responses of those who were involved. He writes about the shepherds who went back home glorifying God for all they had heard and seen. He tells of Mary who treasured all these things in her heart. And he invites us who gather in prayer this night to look for the glory of God in the faces of those around us.
Our feasting and party-ing, our gift-giving and singing invite us to wake up lest the Lord find us asleep at the wheel of existence – semi-conscious of what it means to be human. The incarnation of Christ assures us that being human is a glorious thing, and it becomes even more glorious when life is shared with God and God’s life is shared with us.

As the little innkeeper got caught up in the drama of the Nativity story, let’s open our hearts so that this mystery of the Incarnation – God becoming one with us in Jesus who is one like us – captures our imagination and our feelings, and inspires and shapes our struggles and our joys. All of us who hear God’s Word and break the Bread of the Eucharist are participants in the life of Jesus. Get caught up in the season and the story, for unto YOU a Savior is born this day. May we experience the Christmas delight of this little girl who understood exactly what Luke was trying to say:

She was five,
sure of the facts,
and recited them
with slow solemnity
convinced every word was
revelation.
She said
they were so poor
they had only peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to eat
and they went a long way from home
without getting lost.
The lady rode a donkey, the man walked, and the baby was inside the lady.
They had to stay in a stable
with an ox and an ass (hee-hee)
but the Three Rich Men found them
because a star lit the roof
Shepherds came and you could
pet the sheep but not feed them.
Then the baby was borned.
And do you know who he was?
Her quarter eyes inflated
to silver dollar.
The baby was God.

And she jumped in the air
whirled round, dove into the sofa
and buried her head under the cushion
which is the only proper response
to the Good News of the Incarnation.

(“Sharon’s Christmas Prayer,”
John Shea, The Hour of the Unexpected)

The words of Jesus are fulfilled once again: Unless you become like a little child, you will not enter the Kingdom of heaven... and you will not understand the true meaning of Christmas.