

## Christmas at the Kitchen Table

Luke 2:7

Scott B. Martin - December 7, 2008

Most holidays revolve around home, family and friends; but this is especially true for Christmas. This shows up in many of our secular songs: “Over the river and through the woods to GRANDMOTHER’S HOUSE WE GO...”; to a song from WWII in which a GI serving overseas longs for home “I’ll be HOME for Christmas, if only in my dreams...”; to the classic “I’m dreaming of a white Christmas, just like the one’s I use to know....” We all have dreams of an ideal Christmas, which may or may not be based on reality, but hope springs eternal! We dream of the perfect Christmas in which family and friends gather around festive table in peace, harmony, and love, in scenes worthy of a Normal Rockwell painting. Whether or not your Christmas this year lives up to your hopes and dreams Christ can be present there. Perhaps especially if your Christmas doesn’t live up to your hopes and dreams Christ WILL be present there, only open up your heart and soul to make room for him.

When I lived in Kansas one of my colleagues use to invite myself and others who would be alone for Christmas to their house for a Christmas lunch. Pam was the pastor of a church in a small town and is a gifted story teller. I wish she was here to tell this story, but she had us all in stitches one Christmas day when she told a story of a past Christmas.

Pam came from a fairly large family that was scattered all across the country. Only rarely did all of them get together. One Christmas Pam invited all of the family members to gather at her house.

Christmas is an especially busy time for pastors but Pam managed to get the parsonage all cleaned and polished. The Christmas tree was perfect, glowing with tiny white lights and sparkling ornaments. Pam brought out the white line tablecloth and her best china, that had been given to her and her husband for their wedding. The table was beautiful with Christmas holy and glowing candles. Pam went all out on the meal, cooking many of her mother's recipes. The turkey came out a golden brown and the smell of the turkey and pies she had baked wafted through the house.

Everything was perfect. Everything was as perfect as the new made world on the seventh day of creation. Everything was perfect until all the relatives arrived. She had had run-ins before with her fundamentalist brother who didn't believe women should be ministers and who thought many of the positions the UCC took were paving the way for the anti-Christ. She swore to herself that she was not going to get into these things with her brother THIS holiday season.

For the most she succeeded, but unfortunately she sat her fundamentalist brother right next to her Scientologist brother. Trouble soon began. It wasn't long before the two began arguing about religion. The arguments grew louder and more heated. Dreams of the perfect Christmas were disappearing faster than the turkey!

Before everyone headed back to their respective corners, I mean homes, across the country Pam wanted to get a group family picture. Everyone started to dutifully line up for the photograph. The two brothers refused to be in the same picture with each other! She pleaded first with one brother and then the other. No luck, each of them glared at the other and said, "NOT IF HE'S IN IT!"

Pam couldn't convince them to set aside their bickering for the photo. She ended up taking two photographs. Pam took One with the whole family and the fundamentalist brother in it, minus the Scientologist brother and she took another with the whole family and the Scientologist brother in it, minus the fundamentalist brother.

Then Pam brought out a photograph from that Christmas. Here are my two brothers, as she pointed at one brother at one end of the photo and the other brother on the other end. "I thought you said they refused to be in the same picture." I said. "They did," Pam said with a smile, "but I used photoshop to edit the two pictures I took and created a photo with the two of them in it together. Thank God for photoshop!"

That first Christmas was far from perfect as well. Joseph and Mary had been on the road a long time. Joseph was tired from all the walking and Mary, well you know the story, she was about to give birth, which made even riding on a donkey far from comfortable! They arrived in Bethlehem long after dark. The city was full to overflowing. They tried first one inn and then another. They were all full, NO VACANCY! "Try further down the road they said." Mary and Joseph knew no one in Bethlehem. They had no relatives there. They were desperate to find a place to lay down. They walked clear across the large city looking for a place to stay. The large buildings were behind them. The houses were starting to thin out. Someone had told them there was an inn ahead. There it was. One last chance to get Mary off that donkey and find a place to rest. Joseph pleaded with the innkeeper but he kept saying "There's no room in the inn! Look around you. It's full to overflowing!" Joseph's eyes were filled with despair. He had failed to find Mary a place to rest. Maybe it was this despair that moved the innkeeper.

Maybe it was Mary's condition that moved him. Maybe it was a combination of the two. "Look," he said, "It's not much, but I have a manger out back where I keep the goats and sheep. It's warm and dry and away from this madhouse. You can stay there if you want."

Joseph grabbed the man and thanked him profusely. "We'll take it! Anyplace will do!" And so it was that the Christ child was born in a manger, because there was no place in the inn, but there was compassion in the heart of an innkeeper and that was enough. It wasn't perfect, but it was enough.

David Brooks wrote "O Little Town of Bethlehem" for a Sunday School Christmas service at Holy Trinity Church in Philadelphia. Anyone who has ever helped with a Sunday School Christmas service can sympathize with him. Talk about hopes, dreams, expectations and STRESS. Yet, if ever there was a time when dreams of unachievable perfection are soon forgotten in the face of deep abiding joy a Sunday School Christmas service is it.

**How silently, how silently, the wondrous gift is given!**

**So God imparts to human hearts the glorious love of heaven.**

**No one discerns God's coming, but in this world of sin,**

**Where yearning souls long to be whole, the dear Christ enters in.**

We are now rapidly counting down the days to Christmas. Perhaps your stress level, or that of people around you is rising. As Dottie Escobedo-Frank puts it, "Don't let anyone or anything rob you and your home of your true desire: to meet the Savior this Christmas. Look for the moment when you share a special smile with your child, or when you understand God's love through your spouse, or when you are surprised by the delight of a gift. Mostly look for God at your kitchen table ... for it is there that you might just find the babe in the manger."

The good news is that while our hopes, dreams and expectations of Christmas are often dashed by the hard, cold reality of a flawed world, flawed family and friends, and yes, even our flawed selves, we do not have to photoshop God into our lives. “For God so loved the world, that he sent his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth in him might not perish but have eternal life.” Amen.