

A Christmas Eve candlelight communion meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 24, 2011, 11 p.m., dedicated to Jamie Bobb and our choirs of angels, to our troops home for Christmas, to Coptic Christians and all Christians who are the minority religion wherever in the world they may be, and always to the glory of God!

“Born Tonight!” *
Luke 2:1-20

Tonight marks my 12th Christmas with you at First Church. When Dene Barnard and I looked at this late night service 12 years ago, we were about to give up. Only 40 people from outside the choir had come for two years before. I said, *“Let’s take it one year at a time.”* Each year, a few more people came to our candlelight communion service. Look around tonight, people of God. You fill this space with your beauty and grace. One Christmas at a time, you have come. Thanks be to you and especially thanks be to God for bringing Christmas Eve alive at First Church.

I would like to try something a little different tonight. I would like to offer the sermon from the first person perspective of the innkeeper. You hear about him, only because of his action in Luke 2:7 - *“There was no place for them in the inn.”* But on the first Christmas, someone put the holy family in a stable, and gave our savior a feed trough for a crib. It was the innkeeper.

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

It was a long, long time ago. It was in a far away land a long, long way from here. But the memories of people are long and it seems that no one has forgotten my sad and strange part in the birth of the “child of Bethlehem.”

It’s almost as if he was the only child that was ever born in Bethlehem! Why don’t people talk about the Palestinian refugee camps that have been in Bethlehem for over 60 years? Why don’t you want to talk about those babies - some of whom are 60 years old this Christmas? Why don’t you want to know about the babies whom Herod killed just two weeks after the boy was born in my barn? Why do you see me simply as the man who didn’t help your Jesus?

The truth is everyone feels better about themselves if they can point their finger at me and blame me for his birth in a barn. But, truth is such a subtle and evasive commodity. In fact, the only thing that distinguishes a truth from a lie may be no more than body language or the tone of a voice. If I were to say, “I BELIEVE ” that would be a lie. But if I were to say, “I believe...” *that might be the truth.* How can I blame posterity for missing the subtleties and making me out to be the villain of this story? But if you want to speak the whole truth, you need to catch your voice when you call me the villain. You will need to offer the glimmer of a tear in your eye because nothing is ever completely dark, or villainous, not even the human heart.

Tonight, I speak to you as realists, not idealists. Do you even have a clue what it is like to run an inn? Do you know what it is like to run a family business, a small business of any kind, to run anything in this world, for that matter, even to run your own life? It is like getting lost at night in a forest of a million trees with no compass and no candle. Each tree is a “thing to be done.” Are there fresh linens on the bed? Is there food on the table? Is there wine in the wineskins? Has the bill been posted and paid? Have the children been fed? Who is on duty for the night? Is there money in the bank? Have we paid our taxes? Have we paid our bills?

Are there logs on the fire? What do we need to do to stay alive? A million trees. A million things to be done.

There were a million things on my mind that night. The inn was packed. The people were grumpy, overcrowded, demanding, no one was in the “Christmas spirit,” if you know what I mean!

I remember there was a knock at my door. I opened it to find a heavy-footed pregnant woman so weighed down with child that she looked as though she were walking on the bottom of the sea. There was a man was standing behind her. He seemed like a helpless sort of man. I cannot remember words being exchanged, though we must have spoken. It was mostly silence - that clumsy silence you feel from the poor. You know what I mean? They wanted something for nothing. How can a man run a business with people like that silently staring at you and expecting you do something for them? Anyway . . .

I remember there was bright star in the clear night - one that I hadn't remembered seeing before. It was perfect - the only perfect sight on the night of a million things. Then it happened, much the way you have heard. I told them we didn't have any place for them to stay. I didn't lie about there being no room - there really was none - though perhaps if there had been a room I would have lied. For their sake and for the sake of all my paying customers, I didn't want any birthing racket going on all night. The barn would do for folks like this.

Later that night, when the baby came, **I was not there.** I saw none of it. I heard nothing at all. I was lost in the forest of a million trees, an unenchanted forest to boot. Getting firewood, stoking the fire, tending my work in the inn.

I missed his coming. All your life long you wait for your true love to come. All of us do. We wait for our destiny, our joy, our heart's desire.

I speak to you as a man of the world, I missed everything that night. The truth is, I missed his coming. Don't end up like me, lost in the forest of a million trees. Pray for me, the innkeeper. Pray for yourselves - so you do not shut him out. When he knocks, answer. See his eyes. Answer. Let him in. He is born tonight. Do not miss his coming. Amen.

* Drawn from Frederick Buechner's writing in *The Magnificent Defeat*, Harper and Row, Philadelphia, 1966, pp.66-68.

Copyright 2011, First Congregational Church, UCC