

Is 9:1-6  
Titus 2:11-14  
Lk 2:1-14

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In some of your homes under your Christmas tree, you might find one example of the recent spate of novels and biographies that seek to examine the founding fathers of our nation. It all started with the biography of John Adams and has created a cottage industry of research authors. You can now find out everything you wanted to know about Ben Franklin, George Washington, Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson. These are the names of the men we think of whenever we see the tableaux of the signers of the Declaration of Independence.

Another group of characters is no less known, but no author has taken the time recently to resurrect their lives and display them for all to see. Maybe it is worth our time this Christmas to do so. The characters of the Nativity scene are no less important than our founding fathers and we can learn from them and their exploits just as we can from the others. Time does not allow us to examine each and every player, so I suggest we just look at three: The Inn Keeper, the shepherd and the cow.

If there is anyone who needs an extreme makeover these days it has to be the Inn Keeper. In his current avatar he is right up there with Adolph Hitler, Josef Stalin and Osama Bin Laden. Can we think of any more callous person than the inn Keeper? He is so vilified that few if any Nativity sets include him. The Holy Family is knocking at his door and he puts them in a stable! This just will not do. It is easy to see that he must be as cold and dark as Christmas Eve (before the advent of lights and space heaters). I think this is an unfair characterization of the man. Put yourself in his place (in fact, maybe you are there already). It's a busy time of year; it's the Christmas holidays and the Inn Keeper didn't even know it. His inn is booked; there is a bar-mitzvah and a wedding going on. Every room is taken. He even had to turn away a few others and send them to his competitor. Life couldn't be better, a full inn, happy, dancing customers and the sound of shekels filling the cash register.

All of a sudden out of nowhere comes a knock at the door. It is a man and a pregnant woman. They want a room for the night. Didn't they see all the mules parked in the lot? Can't they hear the revelry coming from the dining hall? What makes them think they have the right to ask for a room? They probably couldn't pay what he would ask for anyway (it was high season).

Thank God the Inn Keeper was in a good mood. Life was good and he could tolerate these people. The man with the wife pleads his cause. It has been a long journey; the time is near for his wife. They are dirty. They are tired. They can't go another step. Something strikes the Inn Keeper. Is it the holiday spirit? Is it their situation? Is it his innate charity? He tells them the situation, "Every room is taken. I'm packed to the rafters and I have had to send others away. I know the other inns in the

area are out of room. I can do one thing for you, however. I have a stable. It's not much, but it is the best I can do. I'll set you up and I myself will bring you some food because the wait staff is busy with the parties." He can see his kindness is well received. He did the best he could with what he had. Without knowing it, he made the first and best Christmas present. It is not the cost, it is not the kind that count; it is the sincerity of the gift that matters.

The shepherd is an interesting character. He is rarely portrayed as he actually was. Shepherds were the lowest of the low. You became a shepherd if you couldn't do anything else. They were outcasts of society. Because they spend their days and nights with the sheep, they began to smell like them. They don't make much money and the rumor around town is that they steal just to stay alive. It was to the shepherd that the first news of the birth of the Savior was made. The shepherd was astounded not because an angel spoke to him, rather because anybody at all spoke to him. When you are lonely like a person in a nursing home or a shelter, acts of kindness are extraordinary events. The angel tells him the good news and asks him to leave the fields with his sheep and head into town – a place he is not usually welcome. The shepherd asks the angel why he should go. The angel responds, "God came to earth for people just like you. He is the salvation of all. He has made himself poor because he came to save the poor. He has made himself homeless to save those who are not welcome. If Christmas is for anyone, it is for those less fortunate." So off to the stable he goes. When he arrives the shepherd is worried about having a gift, about eating or drinking too much or about clashing with the fashions of the other gifts. He reflects on what the angel has told him and sees in this moment the simple joy that was intended. The shepherd and those like him are indeed the reason for the season. Hope is born in the stable.

It is in the stable where we run into the last of our characters – the cow. The cow is unaware of what this evening is all about. The cow just goes about doing what cows do: eating, chewing, eating some more and sleeping. She hears the noise of the newborn's first attempts at breathing. The scream makes the cow look up for a minute, but the cow is undeterred and returns to chewing cud – the cow always brings up the old stuff and rehashes it. For the most part, the cow is oblivious to all that is going on. Because of what she claims is a clear conscience, she can sleep through anything. That was certainly the case that night. She missed the hustle and bustle of the caring Inn Keeper, the choir of angels singing God's praises, the arrival of the shepherd with his mewing sheep and the general ruckus that accompanied all the events of the evening.

Eventually the cow wakes up and shakes its head. The darn bell around her neck jingles (thus the origin of Jingle Bells). She hears the noise of the various people and wonders what they could all be talking about. Can't anybody get any sleep around here? She swears she hears a partridge in the pear tree outside the stable. She realizes that this is no "Silent Night" and that the only thing missing is a little drummer boy banging out Blue Christmas – imagine if it were ten drummers drumming! At that point she decides to go over to grab a midnight snack from the manger. When the cow looks down, she sees something incredible; there is a baby in her food. Immediately she steps back on all fours and bellows, "There is a baby in my food. Get this baby out of here." The cow could care less that it is Christmas; she doesn't see the religious nature of the event. Can we blame her, after all she is a cow. "Get the baby out of here; just give me the big dinner (and if there are any presents I'll take them too)." The cow misses the point of the

whole event. The cow is concerned just about herself. The cow is to be pitied. She just doesn't get it. Yes, it wouldn't be Christmas without her in the scene, but that doesn't mean that it is Christmas for her.

What the nativity scene teaches us among other things are some valuable lessons. Like the Inn Keeper always offer your best no matter how trying and difficult the circumstances. Christ may enter your life when you least expect Him, when there is no more room in your Inn. Whatever the circumstances, always offer the best you have.

The shepherd reminds us of the real reason for the season – it is the poor, it is the suffering, it is the less fortunate. If you only bought gifts for those who already have everything, you missed the point of the day. It is not too late to catch the spirit. Be sure that you do something to help those who truly need it.

Lastly (and most importantly) whatever else you may do, don't be a Christmas cow.

Merry Christmas Everyone!