**“Entrusted to our Care”**

a sermon by The Rev. Christopher Wendell

The Eve of the Nativity of Our Lord

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St. Paul’s Episcopal Church in Bedford, MA

As a life-long Episcopalian I’m almost embarrassed to admit this, but I’ve never actually been in a Christmas Pageant. My childhood church didn’t do one. And while I’m not sad about never getting to play a shepherd or an angel or an ox or a sheep or the donkey or even Joseph -- there is one role that I still wish I could play: the innkeeper.

That’s because, while we didn’t do a Pageant, in the days leading up to Christmas my church gathered for a somewhat different tradition, one from Mexican and Latin American cultures, called Las Posadas, which translates as “the Inns”. Las Posadas is a community re-enactment of Mary and Joseph’s search for a place to stay in Bethlehem, a place in which Jesus could be born. All the children in the community play the role of the wandering pilgrims, Mary and Joseph. They gather with candles in the evening and process from house to house, knocking at the door and singing a simple song requesting a place to stay. Each time they knock, an adult behind the door refuses to admit them, and the children are left to keep searching. At the last door, the innkeeper sings back a reply of welcome, of hospitality, and opens the door where a festive meal is enjoyed – complete with a celebratory piñata!

At my church growing up, we re-enacted this community celebration on a smaller scale, using different classrooms and offices as the various inns where the children were refused entry. As we wandered through the hallways and courtyards of the church, what I remember most was how loud and harsh the voices of No! came back from the other side of the door. Often they were enhanced by an improvised “Get outta here” or “We don’t want you here!”. Sometimes the unseen adults would even shake the door or pound on it, as an intimidating threat of what might happen if we did not move along quickly to try somewhere else. Whether this was a stage direction from an overzealous youth minister or simply a few adults playing their characters with gusto, I don’t know. But I wasn’t used to hearing such strong rejection from adult voices as such a young child, and I looked forward the day when I would be old enough to be an innkeeper and could re-write the lines so they were less scary.

II.

I loved Las Posadas as a child. I love it as an adult, too. I love it because it is a kind of flesh and blood metaphor for God’s own longing to connect more fully with humanity, a longing that finds its fulfillment in the birth of Jesus the Christ. The adults locked behind the doors shouting ‘go away’ represent the human tendency to separate ourselves from God. The children seeking to be invited inside represent God hoping to be welcomed in our hearts. Like the children moving from door to door during Las Posadas -- again and again through the course of history, God seeks a closer relationship with humanity, and over and over God has to face human rejection.

We don’t often think of God as having to deal with rejection from humanity. We usually think it about it the other way round. We find ourselves feeling rejected by God in some way – our prayers going unheard by God, the people we love not being protected by God, even a sense of being forgotten by the Holy one. These are honest feelings and can create a sense frustration and even anger at God. But the irony is that the feelings of rejection are probably just as deep on God’s side of the equation.

As the Bible’s story unfolds, God’s attempts to connect with humanity are rebuffed again and again. First, God tries to relate to humanity through providing structure: Adam - don’t eat the apples, Moses - give these commandments to your people, but humanity rejects those structure as too restrictive. God tries making promises to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob – but later generations fail to understand and honor those covenants, even as God remains faithful to God’s people. God tries to cultivate relationship by anointing judges and kings, but despite good intentions they often misuse their power and ignore God’s vision of reconciliation and peace. Eventually, God tries to reach us through the voices of holy prophets, who speak God’s own words in strong language, but often they fall on deaf ears with little effect. Each of these efforts works for a while, but each is eventually rejected by most of humanity. And this rejection of God’s invitation to peace and compassion and justice continues through all of human history, right up to the present day, even among the most faithful of people. Whenever I feel rejected by God, sometimes it helps me to think about how often God gets rejected by us.

Now, I don’t know about you, but when I get rejected I just hate it. Whether we’re looking for a job, or a friend, or a date, or just asking someone for directions, being rejected can flood us instantly with frustration, anger, fear, self-doubt, and insecurity. It’s tempting to respond to rejection by escalating the conflict. I remember one year, after we’d gone to the Las Posadas celebration a few times, some of us began to realize that the first door we knocked on, was actually the same door where the party was going to be at the end of the night. That year, when the loud voice of rejection cried out “No!” We tried to force our way in to get to the piñata. Of course, that just made the adults on the other side hold the door all the more tightly, as we pulled on the handle in vain.

III.

The miracle of Christmas is how, in the gift of Jesus’ birth, God responds to rejection in such a radically different way – not by acting out fantasies of violence and vengeance, not by withdrawing deep into the universe and leaving us orphaned, but by greater self-giving, by coming to us as a vulnerable human child. I think it is impossible to overstate how radical an act of love this choice is: to enter fully into the human experience.

And in Luke’s Gospel that we read tonight, God takes on not just the risk of full humanity, but the special risks of human infancy. All the details of Luke’s Gospel story are meant to heighten Jesus’ vulnerability: His parents are unmarried and poor; they are forced to travel to a town where they are unknown and have no friends; Jesus is born outside among animals or perhaps in a cave, spending his first night in the cold. It’s as if Luke is trying to underscore the point that without humanity’s help, there is no way God could possibly have survived as one of us.

We often speak in church about our own radical dependence on God. But in Jesus’ birth as a helpless baby, for the first time God became radically dependent on us. Suddenly, God needs human care to survive. It’s a little strange to imagine, but maybe what was lacking in all of God’s previous attempts at relationship with humanity, was the invitation to care for God, to nurture God’s presence in the human world and to recognize its fragility. Babies are entirely unable to care for themselves, and entirely unable to survive without the care of parents or other loving adults. As a parent myself, I know that the bond formed by caring for someone else is even stronger than the bond that forms when you receive care from someone.

It wasn’t just to Mary and Joseph that God entrusted Christ’s care, it was to all of humanity – it was to us, to me and to you. We inherit God’s invitation to welcome the spirit of Christ to dwell in our lives, to nurture it in our hearts, and to let it transform us to care for each other more fully.

It takes an act of deep trust to put yourself into the care of another. God’s gift to us in Jesus is this new level of trust: no longer trusting us just to care for ourselves and each other, but now also to care for God’s own self. This depth of trust is an expression of the deepest love possible in the universe – and God has that love for you.

Tonight God is trying to be born again -- in you. God is wandering through the world, looking for an inn in which to be born. God is knocking on the door, singing to you, crying out to be let in from the cold, and nourished and cherished. You are the innkeeper, standing behind the door. What will you say back? How will you welcome this wandering, vulnerable, child into the warmth of your heart?

Amen.