

Invited Home

What are your traditions for Christmas Eve? Do you gather with family and friends? Do you come to church for the candlelit service? Do you open your gifts tonight or tomorrow morning? Are there special foods that you make for this night, and special foods for tomorrow morning?

My memories of Christmas Eve growing up, was always going to Church even though we didn't go the rest of the year. We always went to the 11:00 service and got our candles in votives and tried to get them home before the wick blew out. On Christmas eve, we were allowed to open one gift from one of our siblings. It went from being right after we got home at midnight, to us calling my mom at work during the day and begging her to let us open one gift before she came home from work.

I am also the daughter of a mail carrier, so Christmas Eve dinner was never a big deal because my dad was out pretty late delivering cards and packages. When he came home on Christmas Eve, we had to leave him alone for a while because he was always cranky due to the overtime he had worked all season.

On Christmas morning, we were not allowed to get up at 3:00 a.m. like we wanted to. 6:00 was the earliest that we could arise. Then we had to wait in the living room, with all the presents around the tree, while my dad made his coffee and had his first cigarette.

And then after presents, we rushed next door to my grandparents house to beat my cousins to the available chairs as we had our extended Hardt family gift exchange. And then we went to my Aunts house and had a very fancy dinner.

What are your traditions? Are they ones of gathering together and eating together? Are there welcome and unexpected guests in your festivities? Perhaps a new boyfriend or girlfriend has joined in the last year?

One Christmas morning stands out to me more than any other. It was the time my family, before opening any packages, came downtown to Cass United Methodist Church and served a big turkey dinner to anyone who came through the doors of the church. That changed how I looked at Christmas, from what is everyone getting me, to what can I do to be a blessing to others who aren't gathered together in someone's home.

In her commentary of our scripture for tonight, Elder Vilmarie Cintron-Oliveri says this: Parrandas are a time-honored tradition in Puerto Rico that take place during the Advent and Christmas seasons. The parranderos, our version of carolers, would unexpectedly visit friends and family at night, serenading the home-dwellers with Christmas music. It was a surprise to be awoken by the lively serenade, and the family would invite the carolers into their home for more singing and refreshments.

One never knew when a parranda would arrive nor how many people would show up. Families prepared as best they could in the event of a visit, putting into practice the old Spanish adage, “Donde comen dos, comen tres” – Where two people eat, three can eat too.

Families made room for extra visitors who arrived, pouring more water into the stew pot or borrowing chairs from the neighbors house. The visitors were invited in to sing, eat, and enjoy the blessings of family and the season.

Joseph and Mary journey to Bethlehem to fulfill their civic duty, and the time came for Mary to give birth. Although the town was full of people, and there was no room for them at the inn, someone offered an unexpected space – making holy room for Jesus’ birth. Before the night is over, the place would receive even more unexpected guests. Shepherds arrived and found the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told to them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed.

What a gathering! Parranda! Where two are invited in, room was made for the holy family and welcomed others, too.

The night Jesus is born, his parents didn’t receive an invitation. In fact, many theologians believe they may have been shunned by family and friends because of the circumstances of their relationship. Mary was a pregnant unwed teenager, and her fiancé was standing by her side. The family didn’t want anything to do with them because it would seem they condoned their behavior, their situation.

Langston Hughes captured their situation in a Monologue from “The Black Nativity”. He says:

Hear again this Christmas story
Christ is born in all His glory
Baby laid in manger dark,
Lighting ages with the spark
Of innocence that is the Child.
Trusting all within his smile.
Tell again the Christmas story
with the halo of his glory;
halo born of humbleness
by the breath of cattle blest,
by the poverty of stall
where a bed of stall is all,
by a door closed at the Inn
Where only men of means get in.
By a door closed to the poor,
Christ is born on earthen floor
In a stable with no lock
yet kingdoms tremble at the shock
of a king in swaddling clothes

At an address no one knows.
Because there is no hotel sign –
Nothing but a star divine,
Nothing but a halo bright
about his young head in the night.
Mary's Son in manger born!
Music of the Angel's horn!
Mary's Son in straw and glory
Wonder of the Christmas story!

This monologue came from the play, *Black Nativity*, written by Langston Hughes, the famous African American poet who lived from 1902 to 1967. He lived during a time when there was no room for people like him. There was no room for them in public universities or public restrooms or restaurants or public swimming pools. There was not room for his children at the best public schools, there was no money for them to have the newer books or school supplies.

There was no room for people of color in our country for so long. Muslims feel like there's no room for them in schools or the workplace with their covered heads and prayer rugs. Latino children feel like there's no room for them in their classes when they ask their teachers why nobody likes them.

LGBTQIA folks say there's no room for them in churches where they "love the sinner, hate the sin."

Those who struggle with mental illness are told there's no room in the hospitals for their care, and the unhoused are told there's no room in our cities for one more shelter, and sorry, all the beds at current shelters are closed.

Differently abled children are told there's no room for them on sports teams or in advanced classes because they're different.

The earth is groaning in pain and she is told, sorry, there's no room in our legislative agenda to advocate for you, there's no room in our budgets for money to protect you even though we all literally depend on you for survival.

Transgender folks are told there's no room for them in public restrooms, and refugees fleeing war-torn countries are told that there's no room for them here in the United States.

As Langston Hughes said, they are greeted by a door closed at the inn, where only men of means get in, by a door closed to the poor.

But you know what? Christ is born on earthen floor. That's how God works. God always finds a way. God always invites us in.

They said there was no room in the inn, God said no problem, I know there's a stable out there. Herod said there was no room in Bethlehem, God said no problem, off to Egypt we go. God

always finds a way, God always invites us home. That reality is just as true today as it was two thousand years ago.

We might say, sorry, there's no room in our budget to help you, or there's no space in our town for the person who is different, or there's no time in my schedule to visit someone who is suffering or there's no room in my heart to love the person who doesn't think like me.

God says, "take a deep breath, trust me, there's always room, you are always welcome."

The story of Christmas reminds us of the ways God welcomes us home, even if that welcome is not extended to us by others. The angel's message is clear: this is good news of great joy for everyone.

Despite the exclusion the holy family experiences, the Christmas story is full of invitations. Mary is invited to carry Christ into the world. Joseph is invited to father him, Elizabeth is invited to foster safety and joy for Mary. Zechariah is invited to prophesy and sing. John the Baptist invites the crowds to repent and change their lives. The shepherds are invited to behold and the Magi are invited to make the journey.

God's invitation to us is clear on this Christmas Eve. We are always invited home. I want to close with a poem from Rev. Sarah Speed, entitled "Invitations"

I've been thinking about a universal truth – the way we all want to be invited in. We want the door to be opened with cheers of "You're here!" We want the clerk at the store to ask how we're doing and the waiter to wink at us and whisper, Good choice. We want the barista to learn our names, which people call being "a regular", but it feels more like being known. We want the stranger to help us pick up our sodas when the case breaks and the woman to put her bag in her lap on the subway, which is to mean, "Come, you can sit by me." We cherish every open palm wave from the child in the grocery store and every city church with open doors when the organist plays.

At the end of the day we are all just a collection of heart and bones walking through this world, exchanging invitations, saying to one another in a million little ways – come, matter here. Come, make a difference here. Come be you, here.

Jesus didn't receive much of an invitation. No one moved their bag to their lap, or opened the door to the inn and said, "You're here!" Still, he came.

What a gift it is to have a God who does not wait on my invitation. What a gift it is to have a God who can't imagine being anywhere but here. Amen.