

## IT'S A HORSE, OF COURSE

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*And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:7)*

Every Christmas the Festival of Nine Lessons and Carols builds to a climax, especially when the last reader announces: *St. John unfolds the great mystery of the Incarnation*. If you give me a few minutes we will indeed join John – as well as Matthew and Luke – in the endeavor. But first I'm pleased to announce that I've unfolded another great mystery. It's a mystery that has troubled me for nearly all my life, especially in the summer. The mystery is this: what is the fundamental thing that accounts for the vast disparity between the New York Mets and New York Yankees? How do you explain it? Humor me – it's Christmas!

Recently, it all came crystal clear. For some time now the Mets have been trying to figure out what to do with their one-time star outfielder, Yoenis Cespedes, to whom they awarded a huge contract after the 2016 season. A clause in the contract states that the whole thing could be voided if the player were to be injured doing certain reckless things. What things? Riding horses on his ranch in Florida, for one. Sure enough, just before last season began, Cespedes broke his foot and ankle, claiming he'd stepped in a hole while walking his ranch. Publicly, the Mets' general manager, Brodie Van Wagenen accepted the story, declaring at multiple news conferences (and I quote): "A horse was not involved."

When I saw Brodie Van Wagenen look directly into the camera and state with a straight face, "A horse was not involved," I said to myself, "And there it is: the difference between the Mets and the Yankees." You see, if you are the general manager of the Yankees, such an absurd utterance will never tumble from your lips. Why not? Because horses play no part in stockpiling as many World Series titles as money can buy. True, you will say such things as, "We now have a fully operational death star." But you will never need to comment on the involvement of a horse. For the Mets, however, a horse, of course, could unfold any number of mysteries. Where did all the money go that was supposed to build a winning team? Was a horse involved? What about that fire at Citi Field? Did a horse, perhaps, kick over a lantern? It very well could be. And this just in: apparently, Cespedes has privately confessed that a horse was indeed involved, and he's agreed to a restructured contract. You can't make this stuff up. It's why I love the Mets. And I pity the Yankee fans. I really do. I imagine all the winning just gets boring and predicable year after year.

We turn now from the boroughs of Queens and the Bronx to Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Caesar Augustus. The Gospel of Luke tells us that there and then the long awaited Messiah was born amidst the Jewish people. The angel Gabriel had told his mother, Mary, that the child would be great: *He shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David: and he shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of his kingdom there shall be no end*. It sounds like years and years of winning ahead for God's people. So what type of Messiah did they get? A fully operational, Jesus Christ Superstar who would command armies, make nations sit up straight, and generally solve all their problems? No. Quite the contrary. God's plan of salvation turns out to be more like a divine comedy of errors than an endless succession of victories.

Today we confess, we do not deny, but confess that when Jesus the Messiah was born, a horse was involved. How do we know? Well, I offer as evidence the horse costume in our pageant closet. Apparently, nobody wore it this year, but it's always ready to go. Also, I have here in my hand a card – a Christmas card from a bishop in the Episcopal Church. If you look closely you will see that a

horse is involved. It might be a donkey, but genetically, we're in the same ballpark. I say this with a straight face: the only explanation for a bishop's putting a horse on his Christmas card is that a horse, of course, was involved. Do you need more proof? Then how about the Gospel of Luke? Luke takes pains to explain that Mary used a manger as a makeshift crib for the newborn Jesus. A manger is a feeding trough for animals, so it's a safe bet that if a manger were involved, then *ox and ass before him bowed*, and probably three camels and a horse, too. A horse was involved.

Jesus was born in the humblest of settings, surrounded by barnyard animals. What does it mean? Over the centuries many thoughtful, faithful souls have seen in it the depth of God's love. God dives so deeply into the creation that nothing with the breath of life is left out of salvation history. Put another way, if a horse can be involved, then you and I, too, can be involved. The divine comedy has room for us all. "*The Lord of hosts is with us, the God of Jacob is our stronghold*," sings the Psalmist. "*They shall call his name Emmanuel*," said the angel to Joseph in his dream, "*which being interpreted is, 'God with us.'*" God with us, so that neither death nor life nor anything in all of creation can sever us from his love. God with us from this time forth, even forever. The gift on offer today is the close personal presence of the living God.

Can you hear the "bah, humbugs" of a cynical world? I hear them all the time. They call into question the historicity of the birth narratives, and point out the inconsistencies between the Gospel accounts. Have you noticed, they ask, that Matthew makes no mention of a manger, and writes that Jesus was born in a house? Others will claim the stories contain too much miracle to be taken seriously in a scientific age. The laws of nature rule out the miraculous. The materialist world view has no room in its inn for such things as a virgin birth, visitations of angels, and the Incarnation of God. Does God even exist? As for experiencing the presence of God, these are but waxen words that melt in the heat of the harsh reality of the lost, the lonely, the oppressed, and the sick. Suffering souls often cannot find their way into the story of God's love goodness. So perhaps a different type of gift might provide a surer path to peace on earth, goodwill to all people, and personal transformation. How about a present to unwrap instead of a mystery to unfold? How about an exercise bike? What could possibly go wrong? (My wife is going to love her new Peloton!)

Perhaps it's time we return to unfolding the great mystery of the Incarnation. When the angel Gabriel told Mary that she was to conceive a child, she asked, "*How can this be?*" Her question might be our question, too. I don't think that the Gospel writers meant for us to get stuck on the supporting cast members of the nativity story, be they shepherds, wise men, sheep, horses, or a girl with a torch named Jeanette Isabella. The characters and the carols are later, creative expressions of a deeper truth: that this child who was born is Christ the king, and through him God is with us. Luke and Matthew wrote their accounts as if to suggest that this notion – this Word – of God's presence, deeply ingrained in the fabric of the cosmos, even participating in the history of humankind, is no new idea. Matthew traced the lineage of Jesus all the way back to Abraham, thousands of years before him. Luke tracked the Word back even further, following the lineage of Jesus to Adam, whom they took to be the representative first human.

But it's the writer of John's Gospel who goes back even further. In fact, John (1:1-3) traces the Word of God's presence back as far as anyone can possibly go: to the moment of Creation. He wrote: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him; and without him was not anything made that was made.* So John is inviting us to behold God's miraculous, creative handiwork, not only in the birth of Jesus, but in the birth of all things visible and invisible.

Is it possible to go all the way back to the beginning? Cosmologists who peer through increasingly powerful telescopes tell us that the expanding universe we know today actually began as what they call an infinitely dense space-time singularity. There and then, in the beginning, the laws of nature break down. In other words, the laws that rule out the miraculous hadn't come into play.

All the constants that govern the universe only came into being at the miraculous instant of the big bang, when God spoke the Word, *Let there be light*. The Word was involved. The miraculous gave birth. In the beginning, the laws of nature came into being and by their elegance carried with them the hint of a Creator, the Word of God's own existence. Both the laws of nature and the Word of God (which are two sides of the same coin) would resound through the ages, but it would take eons before any conscious creatures emerged to notice, and said yes to the Word's invitation. Finally, the Word took hold of the Hebrew people, dwelled among them, settled within them, and participated in their history.

The rabbis of old spoke of a notion they called the *Shekinah* – God's close, personal, unshakable presence with the people. What we say about Jesus the Jew is that by his birth, God's presence, God's *Shekinah* moved even closer. God just took the next step. *And the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth*. Emmanuel. God with us. And there would be more steps to come. The poet U.A. Fanthorpe in "What the Donkey Saw" imagines a donkey in the stable where Jesus was born, surveying the congested scene, including the new parents, and a baby in the trough where its food was supposed to be. The donkey concludes:

Still, in spite of the overcrowding,  
I did my best to make them feel wanted.  
I could see the baby and I  
would be going places together.

God would walk the earth, and one day ride a donkey into Jerusalem for us and our salvation.

So have we unfolded the great mystery of the Incarnation? No, the divine comedy keeps on playing. Some time ago I read a meditation by the late Stephen Verney, who was the Church of England Bishop of Repton. Verney and his wife Scilla were deeply in love, and were the parents of several children. Scilla was a particularly vibrant woman, full of joy and passion for living. In fact, those closest to her, including her husband, had often likened her spirit to a great galloping horse. Nothing could stop her. Thus it was devastating when, in the prime of her life, Scilla was diagnosed with a malignant form of cancer. Life became one surgical procedure after another, followed by yet one more round of chemotherapy. Through it all Scilla's spirit seemed to gallop like a horse. But after one surgery to remove her pituitary gland, she despaired, "they've taken away my spirit." Soon after that she died.

Verney describes days of terrible grief that followed. At one point he took his children to a vacation spot by the sea where they had often gone as a family. As they walked one afternoon Verney noticed a herd of cows off in the distance, and in the midst of the cows a great white horse. He describes that in all the years he had walked these fields, never once had he seen a horse. But this horse, when he and the children came into view, broke from the cows and galloped across the fields right up to the fence where they were standing. It was mare in foal, and she pushed her muzzle over the fence and breathed on them and licked their hands. As a bishop of the church and a prolific author, Verney was seldom at a loss for words to unfold the mysteries of faith and life. But this was an experience like no other. He was at the same time both deeply moved and profoundly puzzled.

What could it have meant? Did it mean anything at all? Was it just a horse, or something much more? Finally the bishop concluded that all he could do was receive the sign as a gift. He wrote: *Somewhat in the galloping of that horse, Scilla's spirit came galloping to us*. The horse was a sign of God's presence in life, in death, from this time forth, even forever. Emmanuel. God with us.

A horse was involved, both there and in Bethlehem of Judea, in the days of Caesar Augustus, when Mary *brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger*.