

How Christmas Is Done

It's the expected story that follows the expected script: a weary mother-to-be, a faithful husband, a journey, a little city chock-a-block with visitors, no room anywhere except the place where the animals sleep. Earlier tonight, children with their eyes all aglow from the candlelight (and maybe a few too many sugar cookies) played their parts in the story as Mary, Joseph, shepherds, and wise men. There were some squeals and some laughs, a few tears and some worn-out parents, but all went mostly according to plan, because that's just how it's done.

Initially the first Christmas follows the expected script, too. Things are perfectly normal and humdrum even. Yes, an angel has paid a visit to Mary, but that event is nowhere on the empire's radar. After all, how much of a threat can a young peasant woman and a baby really be? The wheels of empire churn along and Emperor Augustus decides to call for a census, to register all under his rule in order to make sure he can tax them and draft them to fund his desire to expand his world and his command. He declares that "all the world" should be registered, meaning everyone living in the lands his armies have conquered and claimed by force. The empire counts those it determines to be of value—people with something to tax, young men who could serve the empire in some way. No one seems to balk at this command. It's how the empire works. Never mind that Mary is due any minute or that Joseph may have work to do. The emperor has spoken, and so those living in his shadow do as he commands. That's just how it's done.

The shepherds may not have gotten the emperor's message. They live on the edge of everything. And truth be told, the emperor is probably not all that concerned with them. They really do not make enough to be worth taxing, I'm guessing. And they would probably not make the best soldiers. They tend to be a bit unruly and smelly and perhaps even insubordinate. Some scholars tell us that ancient shepherds are known for grazing sheep anywhere they please without really caring whose land they are on. Boundaries and discipline may not be their strong suit. And so they go about their business, so to speak, tending the flocks and keeping at least one eye open in case a predator should appear. That's just how it's done.

We, too, have scripts that we follow this time of year. There are cookies that must be baked, presents that must be wrapped, cards that must be sent, and exhaustion that will be felt. We gather with friends and family. We go to church. We sing the songs and light the candles. We eat too much and pledge to do better next year. The calendar turns and moves more quickly from one year to the next. That's just how it's done.

And the rest of our lives often follow a certain script, too. We work and play and hope and pray. Our days go mostly according to plan. There are the occasional surprises—good and bad—that throw things off kilter, but then somehow the new normal becomes the norm. Even in the larger world so often we hear about breaking news either from the ticker that scrolls across the TV screen or those endless notifications on our phones. That breaking news happens so frequently that even that has become routine. “More breaking news!” these devices beep and shout at us. And we hardly blink or shrug. Breaking news? Meh. Same old, same old. That's just how it's done.

Until it isn't...Nancy Dahlberg tells a story of a time when things did not go according to plan, when things did not follow the expected script.

Our family was [on the road] on Christmas Day [she writes.]...We stopped for lunch at a diner in King City. I was enjoying a review of the happiness...of the day when my reverie was interrupted. I heard Erik, our one-year-old son, scream with glee in his high chair. ‘Hi there.’... He pounded his fat baby hands - whack, whack - on the metal tray of the high chair. His face was alive with excitement, eyes wide, gums bared in a toothless grin. He wriggled and chirped and giggled, and then I saw the source of his merriment.

A tattered rag of a coat; greasy, worn. Baggy pants, both they and the zipper at half-mast over a spindly body. Toes that poked out of would-be shoes. A shirt that had ring-around-the-collar all over and a face like none other. Gums as bare as Erik's. Hair unwashed, uncombed, unbearable. Whiskers too short for a beard, but way beyond the shadow stage. And a nose so varicose that it looked like the map of New York. I was too far away to smell him, but I knew he smelled.

His hands were waving in the air, flapping about on loose wrists. ‘Hi there, baby; hi there, big boy. I see ya, buster.’ Erik continued to laugh and call, ‘Hi there.’ Every call was answered. I turned the high chair.

Erik screamed and twisted around to face his old buddy. The waitresses' eyebrows were rising. Several diners went 'ahem.' This old geezer was creating a nuisance with my beautiful baby! Now the bum was shouting from across the room, 'Do ya know peek-a-boo? Hey look, he knows peek-a-boo.'

The old guy was drunk. Nobody thought anything was cute. My husband was embarrassed. I was humiliated. Even our six-year-old wanted to know why that man was talking so loud. We ate hurriedly and in silence, all except Erik, who continued to run through his repertoire with the bum.

My husband rose to pay the check...I grabbed Erik and headed for the exit. The old man sat poised and waiting, his chair directly between me and the door. 'Lord, let me out of here before he speaks to me or Erik,' I prayed.

I tried to side-step, to put my back between Erik and any air the old man might be breathing. But Erik, with his eyes riveted on his best friend, leaned far over my arm, reaching out with both arms in a baby's pick-me-up gesture. In the split second of balancing my baby and turning to counter his weight, I came eye-to-eye with the old man. His eyes were imploring. 'Would you let me hold your baby?'

There was no need to answer. Erik propelled himself from my arms into the man's and immediately laid his head on the man's ragged shoulder. The man's eyes closed and I saw tears hover beneath his lashes. His aged hands, full of grime and pain and hard labor, gently, so gently, cradled my baby's bottom and stroked his back.

The old man stroked and rocked Erik for a moment, then opened his eyes and looked squarely in mine. He said in a firm, commanding voice, 'You take care of this baby.' I said, 'I will.' He pried Erik from his chest, unwillingly, longingly, as though he were in pain. I held my arms open to receive my baby, and again the gentleman addressed me. 'God bless you, ma'am. You've given me my Christmas present.'¹

That's just not how it's done. This man, this "bum" as Dahlberg first refers to him does not count in anyone's eyes either. And he is the last person she wants to have anything to do with, the last person she wants touching

¹ <https://www.chickensoup.com/book-story/48111/erik-s-old-man>, as adapted and shared by Michael Kirby in his paper for The Well, 2010.

her baby. And then it happens. The child insists on being held, insists on loving the most unlovable one in the room. And in that instant this tiny child shatters the barriers between who matters and who does not, between who counts and who does not.

Centuries before, another tiny child is born in a tucked away place to a peasant woman who does not count in the eyes of the empire either. And the angels—a sky full of angels no less—appear to the no-count shepherds of all people and declare that this child has been born not only to save those who count in the empire’s eyes, not simply to save those who live within the empire’s bounds, but to save everyone everywhere. “To you—to all of you, to all of them, to all y’all—is born a Savior,” they sing. You do not have to get in line at the census office to be counted. You do not have to live in a certain zip code or speak a certain language or dress a certain way. You do not have to be the happiest or the brightest or the prettiest or the strongest or the healthiest or the most talented or the most faithful to count. You do not have to be debt-free or well-accomplished or pedigreed in any way shape or form to be saved or loved or included by this Ruler. This Savior, the one Lord and Ruler of all is born for you and for me and for all. To him, we count before we do anything, before we line up and explain why we should. This is the great Good News of Christmas. This is God’s story. This is God’s script, and by the grace of God, this is just exactly how it’s done.

Thanks be to God. Amen.