

## **“Tenacious Tradition”**

*Reading: Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-14*

Written and preached by [Luke Richards](#)

In 1584, a Spanish professor of language named Francisco Sanchez de las Brozas, known as “El Brocense,” found himself before the Spanish Inquisition, the church tribunal charged with maintaining orthodoxy in Spain, which had (and used) the authority to torture and execute the accused. El Brocense had been reported to the Inquisition by his own students at least in part because he had criticized how the birth of Christ was depicted in art. We all know what the birth of Jesus looked like, of course: the sky is deep blue punctuated by a blazing star, there’s a rickety old stable on the edge of a town in the desert, and inside the stable are a donkey, a cow, a few sheep, a beautiful woman in flowing robes who looks more like she just came from a modeling agency than a maternity ward, a paternal-looking man with a staff in his hand and a sensible beard on his face, and in the middle is a glowing baby in a crude feeding trough. Not far away there might be a chubby innkeeper silhouetted in the doorway of an inn saying, “No room!” There’s an angel flying overhead and a few shepherds at the stable’s doorway, and probably a caravan coming from the distance with three exotically-dressed men in it, who are almost always representatives of a predictable variety of skin colors and ages.

We could look at hundreds of examples of paintings and sculptures through the ages that portray that; I can’t think of any other event in history that would have anywhere near as consistent of a depiction for so long in so many different works of art. But El Brocense had the audacity to suggest that certain parts of the story as it was traditionally understood probably were not accurate. It wasn’t that he was questioning whether Jesus was really born, or whether He was really God incarnate, or anything like that. No, El Brocense argued that the part about being turned away from the inn and having to stay in a stable didn’t make sense on linguistic and cultural grounds, and so he was taken before the Spanish Inquisition. It’s an argument that actually makes a lot of sense. I won’t go into the details of it today, but the argument is that the part about there being no room in the inn has been mistranslated and misunderstood for centuries, and what probably actually happened is that the holy family was either staying in Joseph’s home or with Joseph’s family, and since the guest room was too small for a birth, Jesus was born in the main room of the house and placed in the feeding trough for the animals, which was actually a pretty common fixture in houses of that time and place.

Now, to be honest, no one today really suggests that our nativity scenes are accurate depictions of what the birth of Jesus actually looked like. They’re not intended to be; we know that the wise men didn’t show up until much later, and we don’t know that there were three of them. Our nativity scenes are intended to be like icons: they’re not literal depictions, but they focus our attention and point us toward the reality of God and what God is doing. The problem for us – and for El Brocense, defending himself before the Spanish Inquisition – is that sometimes we confuse the representation and the facts. Sometimes we enjoy the tradition more than we enjoy what the tradition commemorates. Sometimes we get stuck at the sign and don’t go on to where the sign is pointing. That’s why around Christmas and Easter you so often see articles coming out with breathless headlines promising to challenge everything you knew about Jesus or the church or the Bible because someone dug up an inscription somewhere and wants to publish a book about it: those journalists know they can sell magazines by getting you all worked up over what you think you already know so well. When I was working on this sermon earlier this week, I was worried because I couldn’t

find any examples this year. But sure enough, a couple of days ago I saw the headline that someone had discovered a 5,000-year-old “nativity” painting in Egypt, and decided to make it a public announcement now. Poor El Brocense found himself before the Spanish Inquisition because people liked their tradition so much that they couldn’t handle a different view, even if it might have been true; times haven’t changed *that* much.

As I said, there are good reasons to think that our traditional picture of the Christmas story isn’t quite accurate, and there may not have been a chubby innkeeper turning Mary and Joseph away to a stable, but it’s not my goal to try to make the case one way or the other today. My point instead is that we need to be wise enough to be able to separate our traditions from the reality they point us to. If I did try to make a thorough argument to you that there were certain inaccuracies in our traditional understanding of the Christmas story, I’d bet a few of you would be taken aback, at least at first. We hold our traditions tightly; we value them. To have our understanding of the world and our understanding of what has value challenged can be something we take personally; it’s a threat to who I am and my place in the world.

It doesn’t have to be a tradition in the sense of a schedule you keep for Christmas morning or what you have for Christmas dinner or the heirloom nativity scene you set over the fireplace. There are all kinds of things that become traditions to us, ideas and practices and schedules and ways of looking at the world that we accept and follow because they are comforting and familiar. We may not even have evaluated the traditions we keep; we just do it because that’s how it’s done. The problem comes when we hold on to those traditions long after they make sense and long after they lose meaning. The problem comes when the tradition becomes a thing unto itself, when rather than pointing us to a greater reality it keeps our eyes on itself, when we love the tradition more than the thing or the person it commemorates. And I for one love traditions; I love maintaining continuity with the past, I love telling powerful stories over and over, I love finding old things and ancient things and discovering meaning and beauty for the present that I never would have thought of without those generations who have gone before me. So I’m hardly anti-tradition, but the problem comes when we’ll report someone to the Inquisition because they threaten our tradition.

In fact, because the Christmas story has become traditional to us, what we miss is how much of it is deliberately, shockingly non-traditional. The danger of the beauty and warmth of the season is that we enjoy the tradition and the togetherness so much that we miss what the Living God is doing through it. We can get blinded by our candles and Christmas lights and not see that the Light of the World has come, that God has now revealed to us beyond any question that what He wants us to know most of all is that He loves us enough to become one of us so that He can reach us. We can miss that He revealed Himself not in glory or power or greatness as we usually understand it, but as a newborn baby. We can miss the fact that His birth runs the risk of suspicion of infidelity by Mary, and yet because of her faithfulness and the faithfulness of Joseph her husband, they were the ones chosen to bear Him and raise Him. We can miss that He was born in an occupied land under the boot of an empire, that His nativity takes place under the whims of faraway governments throwing their power around, that the king murders a townful of children to try to stop Him, that He spends part of His childhood as a political refugee on the run. We can miss that most of His own people were ignorant of His birth, and that only the lowest people came to honor him, and that the kings of the pagan nations who were reviled for being far from God were watching more closely and paid him homage.

That's all part of the story and many of us know it by heart because our traditions have done an excellent job of teaching us the story, but it takes an effort to snap ourselves out of the story and realize the significance of a living God who specifically identifies with the humble, the quietly faithful, the lowly, the wandering, and the misfits. It takes an effort to see that God shows us how powerful He is by specifically rejecting the way our world usually builds and uses power. It takes an effort to remember that God deliberately seeks out those who do not have a place of honor or who may not even have a seat at the table.

Have you ever met someone for the first time and formed a first impression of them, good or bad, that you later found out was completely wrong? I'd wager most of us have at least once. You meet someone and maybe they're good-looking and friendly and charming, so as you encounter them in the future you have that urge to impress them and make them want to think you're as charming and put-together as they are. But as time passes and you get to know them better, you realize that their charm is only skin-deep. Maybe that person is actually nasty and judgmental once you get behind the charm, or though they seem put-together they're actually quite needy and wounded, or whatever. Or maybe it goes the other way: you meet someone and they're not impressive at all. There's something about them that you can't stand, or they don't seem at all interesting or charming, or they're aloof or seem slow and unimportant, not worth getting to know. But as time passes, you see the truth of their soul, and you grow to value and love them.

Maybe instead of tradition we could speak of first impressions. Your first impression of a person is only a problem if that first impression becomes a barrier to getting to know the real, living person. The traditions we have and the traditional ways of thinking about God are only a problem when they interfere with getting to know the living God, when our traditional ways of thinking about God make us ignore or resist the birth of God in the flesh right in our midst because we think we already know what God is doing and how God works.

The whole point of Christmas is to tell us that God is alive, God is present, God is at work to redeem the world and redeem people in ways that surprise and even shock us. The whole point of Christmas is to get us to reevaluate our first impressions of God, maybe even to set aside what we think we already know about Him and instead get to know Him personally. He's much, much bigger than a book or a stained glass window or a nativity scene; though traditions and impressions can point us in the right direction, they cannot hope to contain the grand reality of the Living God who loves us, who arrives in humility to embrace the humble, and who invites us to find freedom and new life by doing the same.

The other part of this is that you and I are likely to be the first impressions of the Living God that many people encounter. There are so many people around us whose tradition regarding God is simply to ignore Him, whose impressions about God are either ignorance of Him or belief that God isn't worth spending time on, for one reason or another. If you have encountered the Living God, you might well be the one who either reinforces their traditions about God or shows them the truth. You might have the opportunity to give someone a new first impression of God; your life might be the tradition someone accepts about God. Make sure it's a good one.

The message of Christmas is that God is with us. God has come to us in humility to show us the true power of His love, to give hope to the hopeless, to embrace the wayward, and to put the mighty in their place. That's worth celebrating.



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