

Make Room at the Inn: Unity, Compassion Bring Hope
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For the past eight years my crèche figures have re-enacted the Advent narrative in my home. I select a place for a manger, and Mary and Joseph make their way to the stable. Some days the sojourners move forward, some days back. Sometimes they separate from each other, and some days they are happy to stay still. My baby Jesus appears in the straw crib when I return from leading Christmas Eve candlelight services.

I recognize the figures' movements in my own life; their journey is familiar to me. But it has only now occurred to me that in my careful attention to the details of the story, I have left out a critical plot point: the weary travelers' experience at the inn. All these years, in my house, Mary and Joseph have simply arrived at the cattle stall without the rejection of the innkeepers.

My awareness of my premature denouement came while listening to a National Public Radio story about the continuing housing challenges of Hurricane Katrina survivors. Those who have been displaced and are *still* living in hotels will need to find new residences in early January. Soon, those who have already had a perilous journey will find "no room at the inn." And then I thought of others who had homes last year but are now displaced: survivors of a tsunami in Asia, of floods in Guatemala and of earthquakes in Pakistan, India, Iran and Kenya, just to be mindful of a *few* weary travelers.

In this hemisphere, Advent — the contemplative four weeks prior to Christmas when Christians prepare to celebrate the coming of Christ — comes as we approach the longest night of the year. As the winter solstice nears, my heart is musing about the journey into the darkness and the power of other light traditions.

My Jewish friends will soon begin their remembrance of Hanukkah, the Festival of Lights. It recalls a time when ancient oppressors snuffed the eternal light of the great menorah. When the Jews recaptured the temple, there was enough oil to return the light for only one day. Amazingly, the sacred story tells of a miracle in which the flame burned bright for eight days. Somehow, there was enough oil to cast off the darkness.

My African-American friends will celebrate Kwanzaa with candles for seven days after Christmas. While the festival of "first fruits" is a nonreligious celebration, it is a time to remember the past and collectively reach for the future. The festival celebrates the bounty of the earth and is based on seven principles: unity, self-determination, working together, supporting each other in business, purpose, creativity and faith.

The story of Hanukkah reminds me that there is enough to cast off the darkness of oppression: enough compassion, enough food, enough kindness, enough money. The illumination provided by the lights of Kwanzaa can guide all our hearts towards greater unity and creative solidarity with each other.

"Advent" is Latin for "coming." It is a pregnant season, and we are a pregnant people, actively hoping for rebirth and renewal. As we contemplate the traumas of the past year, perhaps it is time to reach collectively for a future where racism, classism and other forces of a dangerous and lonely night are transformed by the light into an awareness of the abundance that is already present and a harmony which yearns to be born.

I'm not sure what is coming, but I am attempting to be more mindful of those who find "no room at the inn" and am trying to be a better midwife of the light of hope and compassionate abundance.

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