

Christmas Eve, December 24, 2017

By my reckoning ... and, who knows, I could be wrong ... this is at least the fifth time Navity's lovely crèche and its contents has been the focus of our Christmas Eve worship. And each time portions of the Christmas story have been shared by families of Nativity as the contents of the crèche moved to completion. But what I want to share with you tonight has to do with how the wonderful tradition of a Christmas crèche being part of family and parish celebrations developed.

It's St. Francis of Assisi who is to blame. That same sainted lover of nature and animals and peace started all of this. I guess it couldn't help but include animals then, right?

He went to a town named Greccio in Italy. It was about as far north or Rome [60 miles] as it was south of Assisi where he lived. But you knew that part. You didn't know, I bet, that the important year in all of this was 1224 – that's 493 years ago, a bit before most of us were born. He had a good friend Giovanni – let's call him John, OK? – Velitta who became the Lord of the town of Greccio. Francis had his eye on a mountainous location a couple miles out of town where he wanted to replicate the manger scene to help folk celebrate Christmas more faithfully.

It was at a Friar's Hermitage where the friars lived and worshipped and worked. It had a lovely chapel, but it was way too small to handle what Francis had in mind. What he had in mind was celebrating the Christmas Midnight Mass in a whole new way ... sort of a drama ... sort of as we've done tonight except the ox and the ass were real, not crafted figures. They found an open cave around which lots could gather and where the story was re-enacted as part of the Christmas Mass ... just like tonight. They gathered plenty of hay, and had lots of torches and the cave's feeding trough that served as the manger where Jesus could rest. There were folk to play all the parts.

Francis got so emotional when he told the story ... some say he sang it all ... that he couldn't say the name "Jesus" without starting to cry, so he called him the Babe of Bethlehem. That's where that way of referring to the baby Jesus, we're told, developed. So we say, "Thank you God, for the Babe of Bethlehem." We say it tonight, we sing it tonight, we celebrate that gift here and in our homes and wherever we are in our lives.

It's a wonderful story ... but it's only a part of the story. And the rest of the story is why when Mary and Joseph named their baby they called him "Jesus" as the angel of the Lord had said. Jesus. It means "savior" and we remember whenever we use that name that he saves his people ... you and me ... from our sins. Tonight we remember him in a manger. We also remember him dying on the cross ... when the rest of the story unfolded ... and rising again to real life so that we'd know all God's promises can be trusted. That's Jesus. That's the one we remember tonight as the Babe of Bethlehem. AMEN!