

Christmas Eve, 2022

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Prayers From the Manger*

There's something about the manger scene that captivates our hearts and our imagination, heaven crammed in a stable. As the poet wrote:

A stable lamp is lighted whose glow shall reach the sky....

a barn shall harbor heaven, a stall become a shrine.

And the animals! The animals! We love children's drawings of the manger scene, especially the animals they draw. A pastor friend's son, Christopher, drew his manger scene. Mary and Joseph were there. Above was a huge square angel as big as a barn. No wonder she had to say, "Be not afraid!"

The usual menagerie of animals were there, the cow, the donkey, the sheep, the dog. But Christopher added a duck and rooster and a pig! What's a pig doing in a Jewish barn? The holy is sometimes hilarious.

There are animals here this holy and hallowed night. So, for tonight, I offer you Prayers From The Manger. First,

The Prayer Of The Duck

O God ,

I feel so ridiculous

with my big bill and silly waddle and comical quack.

People laugh when I quack.

They try to imitate it for fun,

but without my quack

how would my babies recognize my voice,

or I theirs?

I hear the Christ child is born tonight.

If I should recognize his tiny cry

I would waddle close

and bow my big yellow bill to him. Amen

The Prayer Of The Rooster.

Lord of the Universe!

I awake, and my “cockle-doodle-do” causes the sun to rise!

Or so I thought, until I overslept one morning,

and the sun came up anyway.

They call it a “reality check”.

So now, I know,

I am not the bringer of the sun

but the announcer of the sun.

This is sufficient for me.

I hear God’s son is born this night,

God’s bright light shining

upon those who sit in darkness and dwell in the shadow of death.

If this be so, I will stand aside for him

and bow my head

not used to bending

to him. Amen

The Prayer Of The Pig.

O God, Maker of the earth and all who dwell therein,

I am not among your most adorable creatures.

I grunt and snortle,

no angels' choir are we.

They make fun of me as I roll in the mud.

But You, O God, made the mud too

and called it good.

And from the mud you made us all.

So why do they laugh?

Do they not know where we all came from?

Everything in its place, mud too.

They call me unclean. Unclean!

What an awful word.

They will not even use me for food—

though I should be thankful for that.

I would let them have a delectable taste of me,

but I would not be around for the feast.

I hear the Christ is born this night

and will call ALL things clean.

If so, they will not always call me unclean,

if so, the manger door is open to me too,

and I will go and bend my squatty knees

to Him. Amen

The Prayer of the Mare

God of the mothers,

I'm here.

I've born many foals and loved them all.

It's taken its toll on my body—

for which I have no regrets.

I am gray around the eyes and ears.

“The old gray mare, she ain't what she used to be”, they sing.

They are right. I pay no mind.

I've earned the creak in my joints and my failing eyes.

But I'm here,

and tonight I pray for the young girl and for her son

who will bring love to the world. Amen

The Prayer Of The Cat

O God of All Felinity,

They worshipped us in Egypt, you know.

I hope you do not take offense.

People think me aloof.

They want me to come every time they call.

“Here, kitty, kitty!”

Who do they think I am? A dog?!

I am not like those needy, affection-starved dogs

who run and lick anyone who gives them half a glance.

Some reserve is called for, a little discretion.

Don't give it all away too quickly.

But now, from my high window,

I see the Child.

Later, I will trace across the straw so quietly

no one will notice

and curl my body near his against the cold.

My purr will be my praise. Amen.

The Prayer Of The Lizard.

Lord of the Universe,

I too, one in your evolutionary chain of being,
have come for a look.

People do not warm to me,

I look scary and repulsive to them

with my scaly skin and pointy tail,

my narrow eyes and jutting tongue.

I wish they did not fear me.

Komodo Dragons and Gila Monsters,

they call my kind. Dragons! Monsters!

“Reptile!”, they say as if the word were repulsive.

The “reptilian brain”: that’s what

they call the most primitive part of the human brain,

as if they could survive without it.

They couldn’t even breath without it.

This child, I am told, is the one

in whom, through whom, for whom
all the world and everything in it was made.

Does his include me?

I have come for a glimpse,
out of sight, so not to scare anyone.

I will try not to scare him.

If he sees me, will he smile
and touch his fingers on my back and rub my tail?

“O Come, Let Us Adore Him”, they sing tonight.

If my jutty tongue would allow, I would join. Amen.

The Prayer Of The Dog

O God who watches over us all,

What would the sheep do without me?

They are not among your smartest of creatures.

They would follow each other over a cliff without me,

your most loyal of servants.

They never seem to learn, but

what would I do without them?

My duty is my delight.

We are on the way to the stable, the shepherds, the sheep and, I,

running, almost falling over our selves.

We hear a baby is to be born who will be

the good shepherd of all the world.

“All we like sheep have gone astray”,

your Word says of your human creatures. So

they need you, too. If this is so,

that he will be the good shepherd of us all,

I will place my paws on the crib and say,

“At your service sir!

We will shepherd the world together. Amen

The Prayer Of The Sheep

O, Lord,

We are here already!

By the constant yapping of the sheep dog,

we are here.

He keeps circling us as if we are dumb.

The dull look in our eyes as we graze

are eyes dreaming of rich pastures and still waters,

not stupidity. “Stupid”, what a terrible word.

We are the ones who give the dog purpose.

We hear a child is born tonight

who will go after every lost sheep.

We wander sometimes and need one like him

so we may safely graze in your world.

If we could give our wool to warm you tonight, we would, young Lord,

but for now, hear our bleats of praise. Amen

The Prayer Of The Mouse

They have said, that with the birth of this child

the wolf will dwell with the lamb

and the lion and the calf will lie down together.

I'm not taking any chances.

So I watch from a crack in the wall.

And when they have all gone to sleep,

especially the Cat!

I will scutter across the barn floor

and squeak out my praise for him

in whom there is safety for all God's little creatures

in this scary world of tooth and claw.

Hear my thanks.

And please tell the Cat

of this new order of things! Amen

The Prayer Of The Young Colt

Dear God of the grasses and the wind,

They call me skittish

but shy is what I am.

Crowds make me nervous.

When I am running, running across the fields

with the wind blowing my mane,

that is when I am most free and most me.

All alone and free!

I hear you, O God, are sometimes shy yourself,

wrapping yourself in mystery.

So, maybe you understand me

and why I am happy here,

watching by myself from my stall in the back.

I watch him, and it feels like the joy,

like running with the wildness of the wind.

Thank you, Lord of the hooves. Amen

The Prayer Of The Inn Keeper's Daughter.

God of all wonders,

There is a star overhead.

The night sky is brilliant with your stars,

“like shining from shook foil”, pulsing with life.

It is as if the whole heaven is bowing before your Son,

the one in whom the stars began.

I can hardly make myself go inside,

but my mother needs me, so

here I am, helping her carry clean linens and hot water

for the baby and the mother in the shepherd's stall out back.

A mother and her child are at the center of the universe tonight!

Imagine!

Why do I feel so alive?

My mother is smiling at me.

You have placed us girls and mothers

at the center of your plan to redeem the world.

So, tonight happiness is in me

as I love the child with my hands

carrying linens and water.

For our place in your holy design of love

my mom and I give you thanks. Amen

Finally,

The Prayer Of The Pastor On Christmas Eve.

O God of Holy Love and Light,

Words are never enough this most hallowed of nights

when Christ was born.

But we, your ministers, try as best we can,

our halting pauses truer than our reaching words.

Here God, here we all are, O God of us all:

The Proud, The Ridiculous, The Unclean,

The Loyal, The Lonely, The Frail,

The Questioners and The Seekers

The Skittish, the Shy, and The Shamed,

The Loners, The Left Out, The Overlooked.

The Disinherited and Despised.

We, all hungry for love, are here,

your Children, all.

Give to our hoping hearts, wonder this night

and open the tiniest door to your manger

that we may come in and sing with all the world,

O, Come, Let Us Adore Him! Amen

*With thanks to the inspiration of Carmen Bernos De Gasztold and her book,
Prayers from the Ark, (N.Y.: The Viking Press, 1947 and 1955).

To Richard Wilbur for his poem and hymn, "A Stable Lamp is Lighted".

And to Gerard Manley Hopkins's phrase in "God's Grandeur", *The Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins*, (Oxford University Press, 1967), 66.