

Las Posadas
By
Daniel E. White December 18, 2023

Where we live, Las Posadas is a big deal. Translated into English, posadas means lodging. Las Posadas is a nine-day festival celebrated between December 16 and 24 and takes its name from the Bible story about the birth of Jesus. There was, as you recall from the story, no room in the lodging, the inn.

Like many celebrations around the world, Las Posadas resulted from the merging of ancient traditions with religion. Like most cultures, the Aztecs of Mexico and contemporary civilizations, found reasons to interrupt the darkness of winter with festivals. For the Aztecs, December included celebrations of Tonantzin, the mother of the gods, and Huitzilopochtli, the most important of the gods, the sun god.

We might surmise that celebrating the sun god around the time of the shortest day of the year included some belief that the sun would begin to grow stronger (and sunlight longer each day) if the god of the sun was paid appropriate tribute.

Enter the Spaniards with their Roman Catholic faith. Obviously, the Catholic Church gave special significance to the birth of Jesus, and by the 16th century, it was accepted “fact” that his birth had taken place in December. Symbolically, Jesus was seen as bringing light into the world.

Apparently, the blending of the two traditions, both celebrating light, proved to be accomplished with ease, and the tradition of Las Posadas began in 1586.

Though there are local and regional variations, Las Posadas involves a procession of the faithful, re-enacting the journey by Mary and Joseph in the Bible. In some places, a woman and a man, dressed as Mary and Joseph, lead the procession. Other places, children lead the procession. The major action, then, on these nine days of celebration is walking, seeking out a place to stay.

Learning this got me to thinking about how much of your lives and mine have included a journey seeking out a place to stay, to belong. Many poets, songwriters and psychologists have used the metaphor of a journey as a description of the unfolding of life. Some have gone so far as to say that the journey is the point.

I’m not much attracted to the idea of a road to nowhere but perhaps that is my shortcoming. I have, however, subscribed to “beware of goals—the unaimed arrow never misses” attitude as possibly true. That unaimed arrow lands somewhere, not nowhere. And where it lands matters.

Each of the processions in Las Posadas ends at a place where the celebrants are welcomed. In some traditions, the welcome comes after the leaders of the procession

have first been denied entrance. This re-creates the innkeeper's sending Mary and Joseph to the stable.

The latter tradition caught my attention because the Biblical innkeeper has interested me. We will never know but—was there not a single room in the inn? Did the pilgrims look scruffy enough so that the innkeeper rejected them because of who they were or what they looked like? Was it late

enough in the evening that the innkeeper was annoyed at being called to the door and knew that accommodating more people would mean that he or his wife had to do more work? In the Christian tradition, is the innkeeper regarded as a bad guy? Was there any way he could have known to whom he was denying a room?

Las Posadas celebrations get past that rejection. Each night, a religious rite ends the walk, but the event is not yet over. Pinatas, usually in the shape of stars, are swatted by the kids eager to tie into the candy that eventually is liberated. Stars, gifts; think the three wise men.

Sometimes, the pinatas are a shape with seven projecting points representing the Seven Deadly Sins, and the candy inside connotes the beneficence of God.

Las Posadas, then, includes connections to multiple cultural traditions, focuses first on the journey, gets passed initial obstacles, celebrates welcoming and being welcomed, and finishes with gifts for the kids.

What fun, and how futile, it is to imagine a world where the characteristics of Las Posadas were in evidence 365 days a year, around the world, adapted everywhere to local traditions!

The value of holidays lies in their capacity to make us think. In this country, over the past twelve months, we have observed holidays with these themes: The New Year; “Judged by the content of their character; not the color of their skin;” love; rebirth; mothers and fathers; remembrance; the birth of a nation; celebrating those who labor; honoring service to the country; giving thanks.

2023 has been plagued by foreign wars and rumors of war, evidence of intolerance and hate across the land, poverty and greed all too evident in the media accounts of life in the U.S. But, of course, 2023 has also been blessed with acts of kindness and generosity, with young people having children in the supreme act of hope, with adversaries reconciling, the holiday themes revisited.

Las Posadas ends on Christmas Eve. The journey has been completed. Lodgings have been found.

Where have we arrived?

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