



About Being Lutheran

XV: The Creche

Q: *What is the origin of the creche, or Christmas Crib?*

A: The Child in the manger and other representations of the Nativity have been used in churches since the first centuries. The earliest known depiction comes from around A.D. 380, and served as a wall decoration in the burial chamber of a Christian family in St. Sebastian's Catacombs, Rome.

The creche in its present form and use is traced to St. Francis of Assisi, who made the Christmas Crib popular through his celebration at Greccio, Italy, on Christmas Eve 1223, with a Nativity scene including live animals. This reflected the then popular custom of the Crusaders who, returning from the Holy Land, enacted or erected tableaux of Biblical scenes and sites. Francis' biographer wrote:

[Francis said] "I want to enact the memory of the Infant who was born at Bethlehem, and how He was deprived of all the comforts babies enjoy; how he was bedded in the manger on hay, between an ass and an ox. For once I want to see all this with my own eyes."
... The crib was made ready, hay was brought, the ox and ass were led to the spot ... Greccio became a new Bethlehem. The crowds drew near and rejoiced in the novelty of the celebration ... As they sang in praise of God the whole night rang with exultation ... A solemn Mass was sung at the crib.

The animals at the crib (usually an ox and an ass), although not mentioned in Scripture, were associated with the scene on the basis of two Old Testament passages which were applied to the Nativity: Isaiah 1:3 ("The ox knows its owner, and the ass its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand.") and the Greek text of Habakkuk 3:2 ("In the middle of two living things you will make yourself known; when the years draw near you will be recognized; when the time comes you will appear.").