

A Christmas Eve 12.24.19

Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 2:1-20

Focus Statement: There is always room at God's table.

I listened to a story on NPR that said Virgin Mobile had a study done about how the role someone played in the Christmas pageant affected their future. Marys and Josephs were the most successful, with Marys slightly outpacing Josephs. Jesus's did surprisingly poorly, possibly because they had no lines. Though, I was baby Jesus and never chosen for Mary, though I did play a tone-deaf star once, and I feel like I turned out alright. Donkeys did better than sheep. Shepherds slightly outpaced wise men. But the one character the story didn't cover at all was what were the future prospects of innkeepers?

The innkeeper is a central role in any pageant, their refusal to admit the Christchild is the turning point that sets the crisis in place. A weak or easily swayed innkeeper is liable to just let the Holy Family in, ruining the setup for everything that came next and forcing some poor parent volunteer to rush onstage and redirect Mary and Joseph back to the stable scene. But is this strict regard for regulation a benefit or a detriment to future success. How do our innkeepers fare?

I learned something this week about the design of first century Palestinian houses that has me rethinking the whole Christmas story, or at least the role of the innkeeper. The word translated as "inn," as in "there was no place for them in the inn," that word is better translated as "upper room." It is the same word that shows up twenty chapters later when Jesus asked his disciples to prepare the Passover in an upstairs room for what will end up being the Last Supper. "Inn" is in fact sort of an odd choice of a translation because there

weren't inns in the first century. Instead, because of the expectation of hospitality and providing a respite to travelers, visitors passing through a city would be put up in the homes of local residents, a set-up not unlike an Air bnb. The reference to the "upper room" is because first century Palestinian houses were two story. The family lived on the second floor, while the first floor was home to the family livestock. Which is practical, if you think about it, because cows don't navigate stairs all that well. And even if they did, do you really want to live below a cow? The other benefit of living above the stable is that heat rises. Israel is a moderate climate, but it is a desert so nights can get cool. Living above the stable gave the family the radiant heat of the animals downstairs.

The other thing we know about this story is that due to the registration, many people were on the move. With "all the world" forced to return "to their own towns to be registered," Joseph and Mary would not have been the only people seeking refuge in the homes of the people in the small town of Bethlehem that day.

So here's the shift all this made for me. So often this story is portrayed as a tragic example of human selfishness. A pregnant woman turned away at the door. The Son of God forced to lay in a feed trough, reminiscent of how at the end of his life he will hang alone on a cross, abandoned by all whom he loved and cared for. The innkeeper is cast as the first in a long line of people who will reject the Christ, the question then posed, will you be different? But what if that's the wrong question, what if that's the wrong portrayal? Given the background information about houses and the expectation of care for many many travelers, what if the story of Christmas is actually a story of incredible hospitality?

Picture it this way. Joseph and Mary, and many others travel to Bethlehem. A journey forced on them from Emperor Augustus' need for power. Think of the hubris of this request in the first place, that "all the world should be registered." Thousands upon thousands of people counted and recorded, measured for taxes and the distribution of soldiers. This registration was about tightening the imperial grip, it was about fixing a population in place so that they could more easily be controlled. It is a striking scene to picture, people uprooted and forced on the road at the whim of one person's word.

By the time Mary and Joseph arrive, exhausted from their long journey, many others are in town as well. The resources of this small community are already stretched thin by the influx of visitors seeking hospitality. Imagine the owner of the home of whom Mary and Joseph sought refuge. He had already taken in many others, along with his own family, there is no space available in the living quarters, no room in the "upper room," the inn where visitors would normally stay. But our "innkeeper," if you will, took one look at this exhausted, bedraggled couple, one look at Mary's bulging belly, and knew he could not turn them away. And he found space for them. There was no room, but he made room, made room in his home, in his heart, for the Christ child, so that the Holy Family would have a place to lay their heads.

The Christmas story is a story of the miracle of God's economy, the abundance that exists if we only know how to see it. So many others might have thought of their own overpacked homes and thought, we simply cannot house another. But this man, rather than turn away

the Christ child, found just a little bit more to share, and in that sharing, in that expanding of his expectations of what he had to offer, played host to the greatest miracle of all time.

In a few minutes we will gather around this table, where anyone who wants it is welcome to a piece of bread, or a gluten free cracker, and a sip of wine or grape juice. If you came to church hungry, this will not be enough. No one would call the food we are about to eat a meal. And yet, for those of us who come again and again to this table, we have experienced it as so much more than what it seems. This bit of bread and sip of wine is the food that feeds our souls, that nourishes and nurtures for the journey ahead. More would not satisfy the way this simple taste will.

Dear friends in Christ, the message of our innkeeper hero is this: you have enough to share, and whatever you have to share is enough. So often it feels like we have so little, we can do so little, so why try at all. Better to leave the trying to those with a lot, those who have power, whose actions can make a difference. But the truth in this story is that there is no such thing as a small gift in the service of God. So come to this table for the taste that satisfies. Be fed with the presence of Christ. And then go out, filled for service, knowing that who you are, what you have, what you can offer is not just enough, it is exactly what this hungry and homeless world needs. Thanks be to God. Amen.