

A Place to Stay

A Reflection on Christmas Eve 2022

We all have memories of big family gatherings at Christmas. They may be our own, they may be friends' stories, or even as we recall our favorite holiday movies. The image of families crowded together, bumping elbows, a hundred 'excuse me's and creating a path through a maze of people is part of the holiday celebrations. We can be pretty sure there are some here tonight who made the journey north to be with relatives and are now wondering just how uncomfortable the pull-out sofa may be or if that air mattress and sleeping bag on the floor will actually hold up until Christmas morning. That's just what happens when families get together. The house overflows with people, and we keep on making room so that everyone has a place to stay.

In first century Palestine, in the time of Emperor Augustus, families also looked out for their own. And just as in our time, extended families could be quite extended as there were marriages and remarriages, and a variety of relationships.

This is what makes Mary and Joseph's search for a place to stay, a place for their baby to be born, not only a dilemma but also quite a mystery. We heard those words tonight from Luke's gospel as Mary, "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

It is a mystery that they had no family to travel with, to room with, to be supported by at this most amazing time. Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home where they had to travel despite Mary's pregnancy. So we wonder, if Joseph was required to go to Bethlehem, so would all of his family members—parents perhaps, siblings, cousins. Each of them would have to have found a place to stay once they arrived for the census, and they would have been obligated by tradition, custom and duty to make room for Joseph and his very new, very pregnant wife, Mary.

Yet that did not happen. They had no one. No family, no innkeeper, no midwife. Just a manager—a feeding trough filled with hay, and the company of livestock. When the angels sang as Jesus was born, there were no proud new grandparents to listen to the songs. When the shepherds arrived, they found Jesus wrapped in rags, no proud aunt and uncle swaddling him in a soft blanket.

There are some guesses to solve this no-family mystery, this alone-in-a-stable riddle. One view is that it was because Joseph was older, and Mary was his second wife. Perhaps Joseph had no surviving relatives to squeeze them into a place to stay. Another view is that Mary's pregnancy was so scandalous as they were unmarried and had boldly dared to claim that this baby was the child of God, so they were left estranged.

What we do know, and know with complete certainty, is that Mary and Joseph were left to fend for themselves in a town overflowing with fellow ancestors of King David, yet no one, absolutely no one, could find room for the new family of three.

In a few decades, when Jesus will say, "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me. Just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family you did it to me,"ⁱ he may have had the night of his birth on his mind.

We know that those who would not open the door to Mary and Joseph would not open the door for God Incarnate, for the Maker of Heaven and Earth, for the One through whom all things came into being. The Bethlehem crowds did not know how the world would forever be

changed that night, that everything they knew was about to be turned upside down and inside out, but we know it.

The Christmas story that began not in a stable, nor with angelic visits to Mary and Joseph or even to the ancient prophets centuries before who knew the people walked in a land of deep darkness, but with God's ancient promise to Abraham when God looked upon the creation that had been made good, yet had lost its way.

“The idea of God becoming human in lowly circumstances is wondrous, for it means that God knows you and loves you even as you are, whether you spend tonight alone or trying to sleep on a fold-out couch in a house full of extended family. The miracle of Immanuel, “God with us,” is that we see that though Mary and Joseph may have been forsaken by others, they were never forgotten by God,”ⁱⁱ just as we are never forsaken, never forgotten by God. The door to God is always open.

Tonight the Christ child will be born. The Bethlehem stable is long gone and Jesus is looking for a place to stay, a place of welcome, a place of love. “In each heart lies a Bethlehem, an inn where we ultimately answer whether there is room or not.”ⁱⁱⁱ Amen.

ⁱ Matthew 25: 35-36

ⁱⁱ Frank S. Logue, [://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/making-room-christmas-eve-2013](http://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/making-room-christmas-eve-2013)

ⁱⁱⁱ In Search of Our Kneeling Places, by Ann Weems in 'Kneeling in Bethlehem,' The Westminster Press, Philadelphia, 1980