

And Now A Good Word For The Innkeeper

December 24, 2009

Richmond United Church

Christmas Eve

Luke 2:1-7, (8-20)

Read the passage: [The Message](#) or [The New Revised Standard Version \(NRSV\)](#)

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There we are, my brother and I, in the backseat, and the motels with their no vacancy signs. The tension is rising as we drive on and on. It was getting dark so my father decides he will go to the Banff Springs Hotel. It is beyond our price range but maybe they might have a room. No, but we can put you up in the staff house - a tent on a cold night. But the innkeeper had taken pity on us.

There we are, in Jamaica and the rooms are not there because the innkeeper did not make the family move because of death. Steve and I phone around and no rooms. Then one place says we have rooms in part of the hotel under renovations. The innkeeper had taken pity on us.

There they are, Mary and Joseph looking for shelter against the storm. And words we use every Christmas, "No room in the inn." We have had generations of sermons that have emphasized the surface meaning of the story. We have been called upon to open our closed hearts, to prepare room for the heart of love. We have been asked to birth a generous spirit. Of course, there is truth to this metaphor. It is true that at this time of the year our hearts are touched and we do become more inclusive and welcoming of the stranger. All good stuff from those famous lines.

Yet there is more depth to Luke's story, for the innkeeper is misunderstood. Note how one translation says there was no space for them. Then the line that says they had to find an inn tells us not all is right with this situation. Normally, the hospitality rule requires kinsfolk to care for the traveler. The story says it is his hometown, so there would have been some family there to take them in. Yet here they are at the inn. Why? And why in Joseph's family's hometown?

Luke tells us by the location that the Roman's had disrupted the culture. They had forced people into foreign ways of being. This tells us they are a oppressed people, for all invading armies destroy the ideas of a community so the people will become compliant.

We know, also, they would not be taken into the kinship network because Joseph and Mary are dishonoured, their family dishonoured. In comes the innkeeper who does his best to provide shelter from the storm. Rather than being hard hearted, the innkeeper was sensitive to all his guests.

Inns in that time were not Holiday Inns. Not even up to the standard of those motels that charge by the hour. What you had was one big room full of those who had no honour. A room full of snoring men who had no families.

To have Mary in such a place would make her unclean and Joseph dishonoured. Things that would cause them problems and could lead to be exclusion from their community. If Mary gave birth in the inn those men would be double unclean, not only from their professions of soldiers and shepherds, but because Mary giving birth in their space would make them unclean. For those who had no home their burden would have been increased.

So the innkeeper is a double sign of hospitality. He cared for the needs of all - Mary and those who slept in the inn. He had compassion and provided a warm place - the stable. This metaphor suggest that God's home is in the muck and smell of the stable - the world. There the dishonoured and shameful are made whole. Earthiness is the place where we practice hospitality.

Then the shepherds - they were not highly honoured - they were the cowboys of their time - hanging out in all the wrong places. So for them to be the honoured witnesses is to reinforce the idea that God hosts this world in all its brokenness and seeks to bring healing. From the edge of society comes the announcement of here is a King - not your normal source of hosting life.

The stories remind us that hosting and carnality are the reasons for the season. For hosting is healing - binding together our wounds and connecting our webs of relatedness so we can experience wholeness. The story teller drives home this point - if we are open, we too can hear the angel voices - see the glory of God in everyday events.

This is not simply a narrative of past events, it is a story that speaks of God presence with us, in this world of ours. The story begins with a birth that speaks of the "scandal of particularity."

God's love comes crashing into reality, and in this story history is a profoundly moral story in which each of us, however small, has a part to play well or badly. The story tells us we are not left alone in a empty universe, for the whole creation resounds with the music of God. All existence sings songs of joy. It is a birthing unlike other births, for it leads to the overturning of the status quo, a crucifixion and a resurrection. Through this story we can interpret our own struggles, victories, sufferings, and hope.

We are invited to jump into life, to taste it, to have the enjoyment of our bodies. The God we celebrate loves the flesh and blood of life, and it is in this flesh and blood that we encounter deep spirituality. True spirituality takes us deeper into our world, to love it and move it to more beauty. Hosting is about nitty-gritty reality, hosting others with our hearts pounding with expectation. When we wander through this Christmas story and reread it in its historical context, we see the writers were using stories of great births in our messy history. It is a story about hosting and that can help us see ourselves as natural hosts.

We gather at the table to be hosted by God, to rehearse the joy of hospitality. This is a table where all are welcome, a place to find healing and forgiveness. And after tasting the bread and wine of God, we go to host this world of ours. Having claimed our inner sense of beauty we go out to create more beauty in our world. We birth a new way of being - we go out singing and embracing a way of life that is inclusive, caring, sharing of burdens. Affirm the light of God that lights up this dark night of our soul - remember once again - God is born in us tonight.

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