

Advent Sermon Series 2009

*The "Lesser" Christmas Characters 3: The Innkeeper ~ Making Room*

Luke 2:1-7

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“She wrapped him in cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.” I have a confession to make: it surprised me to discover that the innkeeper is not in fact mentioned in the Bible! You see? The story can be so familiar, so mixed up with later legends and traditions, that even a minister can be fooled. In looking at the Christmas story through the eyes of minor characters, I wanted to study the innkeeper, yet she doesn’t even make a scriptural appearance! As with Herod, she doesn’t appear in manger scenes, although that manger may very well have been hers. But she – or he – does appear in legend and story all the way up to contemporary times. For all that she’s not canonical, she captivates the Christian imagination. And that’s not really surprising, considering that the theme she invokes is one of hospitality.

Hospitality is an important theme throughout the Bible, beginning with Abraham entertaining three angels unaware, angels who had come to tell him of the miracle birth of another long-awaited heir. Over and over again the Bible asks how we treat strangers, for “our father was a wandering Aramaean, and we were once strangers in a strange land.”

Today we live in a very mobile society. It’s rather rare for people to live their whole lives in the same place. Rather, people expect to move often, and not only to a different house or neighborhood, but to a different city or state or even country. We do still have a certain wariness about strangers, and due to all that mobility those strangers often live next door to us, but it’s probably hard for us to understand just how suspicious ancient peoples were of strangers in their midst. And because of that suspicion, innkeeping was considered a shady business. After all, innkeepers dealt with travelers and foreigners on a daily basis. Who knew what weird ideas they might pick up! And what could those odd strangers be getting up to while they stayed in those inns? It was neither safe nor respectable to have strange folks coming and going all the time in those inns.

Yet innkeepers were also very important, because even in ancient times, people did sometimes have to travel. And precisely because they were away from home and everything familiar, they were vulnerable. Prey to brigands and thieves, even to their fellow travelers, not to mention unscrupulous innkeepers who might try to cheat them or even steal their belongings. So innkeeping was suspicious all around. Necessary, but no one wanted to have to avail themselves of an innkeeper’s services if they could help it.

Of course, Mary and Joseph weren’t exactly traveling by choice. In the Christmas story, they and many others had to take to the road because of a census ordered by the Roman governor, a census that required people to travel to the towns of their birth in order to register. Now, this does not in fact make any sense. When you’re taking a census, you don’t have people return to their birth towns. We’ve got a census coming up next year. Imagine the chaos if everyone had to go to their hometowns! Rather, this census story was created to solve a dilemma, namely that Jesus was from Nazareth, a hick town in northern Israel far from the center of power and significance. Even today, Nazareth, located in Galilee, is in one of the more undisputed regions of Israel. Bethlehem, by contrast, is next door to Jerusalem. Today it is basically a suburb of that great city, and it is right smack in the middle of disputed territory, coveted by all sides. More than that, Bethlehem

was the city of David, the place where Israel's greatest king had been born. For that reason, David's true heir, the promised Messiah, was supposed to come from there.

So the gospel writers had to give Jesus a better birth town than Nazareth in the sticks. Matthew handles it by saying Jesus was originally from Bethlehem, but due to persecution from Herod, he flees for safety in the boondocks of Nazareth. By contrast, Luke starts with Jesus in Nazareth, but cites a government census as the reason he was born in Bethlehem. The stories do not agree, yet it is interesting to note that both writers use a government-forced migration as their way to get Jesus where he needs to be. He may be the Messiah, but he also – and this is significant – is a refugee.

This places him solidly in the tradition of the Bible, which contains many stories of people leaving their homes. Sometimes they go at the request of God, as with Abraham and Sarah, but often they are forced from their homes, and for the same reasons that people are today. War is a big one, but also famine or natural disaster, or economics, the hope for a better life somewhere else, and yes sometimes even for bureaucratic reasons. All of these are ways that governments force people to move, and even if it is sometimes for a legitimate reason, people still feel like mere pieces on a game board. No one likes to be displaced, to be forced to depend on the kindness of strangers. This is why some folks refuse to obey evacuation orders in the face of a natural disaster. Foolhardy as they are, and we may cluck our tongues at them for risking their lives, but it is also understandable. How bad would that storm or fire or flood have to be for you to be willing to leave your home?

Dislocation is a traumatic experience, even when it's only supposed to be temporarily. Because the thing is, there's always the possibility that you may not get to go home again, as with Hurricane Katrina. And it's not just the loss of things that have sentimental value. It's about the places that you know, familiar to you. You know where to go to get food and the necessities of life. You know what the water tastes like. You know the sounds of the neighborhood at night. You know what the air smells like in the morning. Home is so much more than just a place to pitch camp. It is an extended part of our bodies. To lose that is literally like cutting off a limb. No wonder moving is one of the most stressful things we can go through.

And for Jesus, he was twice over a refugee. Not only as a baby in a family forced from their home, but as the son of God. Central to Christ's story is the idea, in traditional language, of Christ leaving his heavenly home for an earthly one, trading in a divine existence for a mortal one. Talk about dislocation! Now, Jesus was willing to move in order to meet the people he was called to serve. Yet the whole set-up, born as an infant in a strange town, means that however much Jesus came to serve, he also needed to be served by others. He too had to depend on the kindness of strangers. He entered this world in need of hospitality. It's not what you expect from a God. But Jesus always would do unexpected things.

And this is where we return to our innkeeper, and why she's so important, why succeeding generations have been so fascinated by her. Nothing is known in the story, so we rush to fill in the blank. And whenever the Bible invites us to fill in the blank, our answers say a lot about ourselves. What was that innkeeper like? She must have been hard and stingy, turning the couple away, the woman already having labor pains, casting them out into the barn. Was it really that there was no room in the inn? Or was it that there was no room in the innkeeper's heart? Or is there a different truth? The inn may indeed have been full, overcrowded with strangers dislocated by the census. The stable may have been the best that the innkeeper could offer, her way of extending some shelter at least, rather than turning the couple out into the streets. At least it was warm and dry.

That stable, what does it mean? Hospitality, or lack thereof? Was it the innkeeper's attempt to entertain angels unaware, or did she just want them out of her hair? And since we're exploring these minor characters in order to learn more about our own response to the Christ child, what does hospitality mean to us? The beloved carol, "O Little Town of Bethlehem" addresses it directly: "O Holy Child of Bethlehem, descend to us we pray. Cast out our sin and enter in, be born in us today. No ear may hear His coming, but in this world of sin, where meek souls will receive him still the dear Christ enters in." The Christ child is Immanuel, God with us, but a God who comes asking for, depending on our hospitality. Think of that. It's incredible!

We like to think we're friendly, welcoming, hospitable people. But are we really? Or are we only hospitable to our friends, to people who are like us? Would we be hospitable to a refugee child from a poor family that have no place to lay their heads? If God had to depend on us for welcome, would we be able to provide?