

"The Innkeeper's Story"
(a first-person narrative)
Sermon for Christmas Eve
December 24, 2007
Text: Luke 2:1-20
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It would have been so easy to blame the whole mess on the politicians, after all they had a lot to do with it. It was pretty much their fault. Good ol' Emperor "Against-Us," I mean Augustus. He's the Roman Caesar who decided that the empire needed more money. Surprise, surprise. So like the tax and spend liberal he was, he decided that all the world needed to be taxed—everybody, everywhere. If you were living and breathing, you needed to be taxed.

There was only one problem. Like most things they think up in Rome, it turned out not to be such a simple deal. Oh it sounded great, just tax the world. But it was not that easy. First there had to be a registration. Rome had to *find* all the people in the world before it could tax them. Do you know how hard that was?

Then they came up with this brilliant idea: "Let's send all the people to their birthplaces or where their families originated from to be registered. If all the people go to their hometowns at the same time, we can register them rather easily." *Not*. Here is why that was such a bad idea. *Not every hometown is the same size*. Big bag of duh! Some places, like Jerusalem or Jericho, are big enough to handle large crowds of people coming to town at one time. They are set up for it. They have huge hotels and convention centers.

But not Bethlehem. Not in this town. We didn't have the room. We were not equipped to accommodate the number of people who came to town to be registered to be taxed. Isn't that typical of government? They dream up all this wonderful stuff that just won't work in the real world. It's insane.

Now I know that you are familiar with this story I'm going to tell you. But you haven't heard it from me before. You don't know my side of it, what I went through. You see, I am the innkeeper. I owned and operated the only inn in town. Look closely. The story says that there was no room in *the*

inn. That's no accident. There was only one, and it was mine, and what I am trying to explain to you is *why* there was no room in the inn that night.

It was no Hilton or Hyatt or even a Holiday Inn, you understand. It was just a little bed and breakfast, a regular mom and pop operation. I got it at a good price and had fixed it up myself. I was really proud of all the work I had done. It had a three star rating in the *Guide to Bed & Breakfast Inns of Judea*. It wasn't a big money-maker, but it put my kids through college and provided a decent living for me and my wife. The work wasn't too much for us. With the usual business we had from week to week, my wife and I didn't have trouble taking care of things without having to hire extra help.

But of course such was not the case on that Christmas Eve. There had been a steady stream of people all day long trying to get me to give them a room for the night. They had come from all over for the registration that was supposed to start the next day. There were hundreds of them. Some could stay with family members or friends, but many of them had no living relatives and had lost contact with their friends a long time ago.

Needless to say, then, the inn was absolutely overrun with people trying to get a room. It was filled in no time. By ten o'clock in the morning on Christmas Eve, all the regular rooms were occupied. But people kept coming. My wife and I did the best we could. We managed to make some extra beds available to a few people by doing some creative use of space here and there, but it didn't take long to run out of any space anywhere. And more people kept coming to the door.

I was running all over the place. There were bathrooms to clean, fresh towels to set out, linens to change, food to buy, breakfast items to cook, directions to give to the guests—an endless number of details to attend to. And despite the "No Vacancy" sign on the front lawn, more people kept knocking on the door needing a place to stay. This went on all day long and into the evening.

By that night I got to the point where I said to myself, "If I hear one more knock on that door, I am going to scream. If just one more person asks for a room, I am going to explode." I was stressed

to the max. And of course, almost as soon as I had said that, there was another knock at the door. I started not to answer it. I wanted just to ignore it. "Maybe they will give up and go away," I thought to myself. I was too stressed out to talk to anyone else. I didn't have it in me to say "we're full" one more time.

But something compelled me to go to the door that last time. I don't know what it was. When I opened the door there was a couple there, a young woman and her husband who was considerably older than she was. The woman looked very pregnant. They both appeared to be so tired. It was a pitiful sight.

I hate to admit it, but my first reaction was rather cynical and unsympathetic. You see, I had been hearing sob stories all day long. People will say anything to get what they want. Folks were using every trick in the book to try to get me to let them stay the night—claiming to have made a reservation months ago, claiming to be a long-lost relative of mine, or dropping some important person's name to impress me enough to give them a room. I had heard it all. But this was the best yet. Making yourself look like you were going to have a baby at any moment just to get a room. That takes the cake. I almost slammed the door in their faces. What a con job.

As I said, that was my first impression. But for some reason I took a second look at the woman. Something in her eyes told me that she was for real. She truly was about to have a baby. Before I could explain that I didn't have any rooms left, the husband, who introduced himself as Joseph and his wife as Mary, said that they had traveled from Nazareth where they were living. He talked about how hard the trip had been on his wife. He said that they would be happy to stay anywhere for the night, even in the animal courtyard in the back. They just wanted someplace out of the cold.

"The animal courtyard," I said to them. "You don't want to stay there. Only the poorest people stay in the stable. Don't you have family or friends you can stay with?" I didn't want to put them in the stable. A part of my reason was pity, but a part of it was selfish. I ran a nice place. Did I mention

that my inn got three stars in the *Guide to Bed & Breakfast Inns of Judea*? I didn't want to jeopardize my rating by having people stay in the animal courtyard. Plus you know how it is . . . you help one poor family and the next thing you know, there is somebody looking for a handout every time you turn around. Besides I was just too busy to spend the time getting this couple settled in the stable. There were too many other things to be doing.

But they did not have anywhere else to go. So against my better judgment, I took them out back to the animal courtyard. I didn't really want to, and I sure didn't have the time to do it, but I did it anyway. I just felt sorry for them, especially that poor woman, as pregnant as she was.

I got Joseph and Mary taken care of as best I could. It was no great place to spend the night, but at least it was warm, and the hay was fairly fresh and clean. I went back inside the inn and set about getting the rest of things on my "To Do" list accomplished. My wife and I worked well into the night making sure all the guests had what they needed. Quite frankly I was so busy that I forgot all about Mary and Joseph out in the stable.

Finally we were able to go to bed. All the chores had been done. Extra blankets had been distributed, the breakfast orders had been taken, and even the mints had been placed on all the pillows.

At last the guests seemed to be asleep.

And mama in her kerchief, and I in my cap
Had just settled down for a long winter's nap.
When out on the lawn there arose such a clatter,
I sprang from the bed to see what was the matter.
Away to the window I flew like a flash,
Tore open the shutters and threw up the sash.
The moon on the breast of the new-fallen snow
Gave the luster of midday to objects below.
When what to my wondering eyes should appear,
But a whole bunch of shepherds—"What are they doing here?"

They ought to be out in the fields, keeping watch over their flocks by night. What in the world are they up to?" I asked myself. I had to go see what the commotion out in the animal courtyard was all about.

I was halfway out to the stable when I remembered about the couple having a baby. Sure enough by the time I got out there, the mother, Mary, had wrapped her newborn in some cloths and had put him in a manger, one of the feeding troughs for the animals. Joseph, the proud father, was admiring his new son.

And it was so strange. All these shepherds were standing around gazing at this baby like they had never seen one before in their lives. They were awe-struck and dumbfounded by this newborn child in a manger. And they were so excited. I've never known shepherds to get excited about much of anything, but here they were, these rough and tumble guys, acting like a bunch of kids with new toys. It was the weirdest thing I had ever experienced.

So I said to one of the shepherds standing close to me, "There's something happening here; what it is ain't exactly clear." He replied, "You're exactly right, my friend. There *is* something happening here—something wonderful." "What's so wonderful about a baby being born to a poor couple out here in my stable?" I asked. "Here's what's so wonderful about it," remarked the shepherd. "That's no ordinary baby over in that manger. That baby is the Christ, the Messiah, the Chosen One sent from God to save the world."

"Right," I said to the shepherd, "the Christ being born in a cattle stall. Come on, man, what kind of thing is that." "It's a *God* thing," said the shepherd. "It's the kind of thing God and only God would do. God is in this thing, and you know that God doesn't always do things like we think they ought to be done."

The shepherd went on, "Maybe that's why God had angels announce this baby's birth to us shepherds instead of to the politicians. Maybe that's why this baby has been born in a small town like Bethle-hem instead of a big city like Jerusalem or Jericho. And maybe that's why this baby is out here lying in a hard manger on some simple straw rather than in your inn lying on a nice soft feather bed. Maybe God is trying to remind us that his ways are not the same as ours and that what we consider so

important may not be all that significant to God."

For some reason I believed that shepherd. There was something different about that night and what was going on in the animal courtyard. Something had happened. Everything seemed to have been changed. There was something new, something joyful, something wonderful in the air around us. I could just feel the splendor and the majesty of God, even in such a humble place like the stable.

The shepherds left after a while, still jabbering away about what God had done. I just stood there and watched the couple, Mary and Joseph, and looked at that baby. I asked them what they were going to name him, and they said, "Jesus." I told them that I liked that name. It seemed to fit.

It was a long time before I came to understand what really went on that night. It took me years to realize why it was important for the Son of God to be born in a place like the stable behind my inn instead of more opulent surroundings. This baby, Jesus, grew up to become the Savior of the world, just as the shepherds said he would. He taught us how to have authentic and genuine life by teaching us about God and his kingdom. He taught us that at the heart of God is suffering love, and he demonstrated that very love in his own death. He taught us that in God's kingdom the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. He taught us that worldly things like power, prestige, position, control, and an abundance of material possessions were not a part of the kingdom of God.

After awhile I caught on to what he taught. Over time I came to understand that being a part of the kingdom of God was more important even than having a three star rating in the *Guide to Bed & Breakfast Inns of Judea*. And eventually I came to see that only one who was born in an animal courtyard and laid in a manger could save us from our bondage to the things of this world we mistakenly put so much value in.

Even though I have come to worship and adore him as my Lord, I still picture Jesus as that little baby in a manger in a cattle stall behind my inn. I often think about how wonderful that night was. And I think how close I came to being too busy, too stressed out, too preoccupied, and too selfish to

offer the stable at the inn so that he might be born. So I am thrilled that I somehow found it within my heart to make even such a humble place available for Jesus' birth. Because his birth, *his* birth, in my animal courtyard has certainly allowed me to understand better what really matters to God and to make room for those things in my life.