

Tonight, Tuesday, Dec. 22 at 5:00 - Longest Night Service
Thursday, December 24
4:00-Walpole Chapel Service of Lessons and Carols
5:30- Christmas Eve Candlelight Service of Lessons and Carols

Sunday morning the children of our Sunday School presented their annual Christmas Pageant. I think this one was my favorite!

We held in prayer Gerry Kelsey and Betty House. Please keep these two wonderful women in your prayers.

On our Advent journey, we have talked about Zechariah and Elizabeth, Joseph and Mary. This past Sunday we spoke of the Innkeeper.

MESSAGE *Will you open the door?*
GOSPEL READING Luke 2:1-7 and 22:7-13

In Luke 2:1-7, Luke tells us: "In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. (This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria.) And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to Bethlehem the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David. He went there to register with Mary, who was pledged to be married to him and was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them". We imagine No Vacancy signs posted at the front door of every hotel, motel, or bed and breakfast in Bethlehem. There was no room in a little village on the edge of nowhere for a poor pregnant woman and her low-wage, day-laborer husband. No room for Mary's child to be born.

That is one of the most poignant lines in the story. It has given birth to countless Sunday school dramas in which Mary and Joseph go knocking on doors searching for a place for Jesus to be born and are met with cold rejection from a hard-hearted innkeeper.

Unfortunately, there is no innkeeper in the Gospel accounts. He is a fascinating figment of our Christmas imagination. His presence as a witness to the birth of Jesus is conjured up in Christmas songs, legends, and dramas on the basis of what may be a mistranslation of the final word in the phrase "there was no room for them in the inn."

The word Luke uses here, 'kataluma' actually means 'guestroom'. It's the same word Luke used for the room in which Jesus shared his last Passover supper with his disciples. It described the upper level room of a typical Palestinian home. In contrast, when Luke described the commercial inn where the good Samaritan left the man who had been robbed and beaten, he used the word 'pandochelon'. Instead of a stable, New Testament scholar, Ben

Witherington contends that Mary and Joseph were given the ground level, rear portion of an ancestral family home where the animals were fed, protected, and housed in the winter.

If Luke was actually describing the upper level guestroom of a family home, how might that impact the story? Could it be that Joseph brought Mary to the home of a relative whose guestroom was already packed with others who 'belonged to David's house and family line'? Could it be that giving them the downstairs back of the house was the best the family had to offer? Or could it be that due to the questionable nature of Mary's pregnancy, the ashamed relatives wanted to hide her away from view? Or that being kosher Jews, they knew that the house would become unclean if a woman gave birth inside it? Or could it be that Joseph's relatives rejected Mary and Joseph?

Whatever we do with the innkeeper and however we translate the text, the important question is whether there is more here than just a sentimental detail in a beautiful story from the past. What if this could be an accurate description of our crowded, confused, chaotic present? What if whatever happened in Bethlehem is also the description of what happens in our own lives? What if there really is no room in this world for Jesus' words amid the confusion of our ceaseless chatter? No room for his subversive kingdom in our political power struggles? No room for his call for peacemaking? No room for his compassion amid our hard-hearted headlines? No room for Mary's vision of the day when the hungry will be fed? No room in our sin-broken world for the angels' promise of peace on earth and goodwill to all?

And what if this is not only our story but also God's story? What if this is the story of the loving God who refuses to honor the No Vacancy signs we erect around our lives—the intrusive God who is determined at all costs to be Immanuel, God with us? What if it draws us into the story of our relationship with the God who is at work to transform the kingdoms of the earth into the Kingdom of God?

The story we tell at Christmas is nothing less than the shocking announcement of the God who never stops coming down to search for people like Mary and Joseph through whose lives God's new life, new peace, and new hope can be born. The God we meet at the manger is the God who never stops knocking on the closed doors of our lives in a relentless attempt to come in.

We all have No Vacancy signs. We don't like to admit it. We'd like to convince the world that we have it all together, that there are no empty places in our lives, and that we have everything we need. But the truth is that we all hang No Vacancy signs around dark places in our souls and conflicted corners of our world. There are rooms into which we do not want Jesus to go. None of us really want to acknowledge the vacancy in our souls, the emptiness in our hearts, the hollowness in our compassion, or the shallowness of our hopes.

The gospel is our reminder that, like the imaginary innkeeper in Bethlehem, the coming of Christ challenges us to take down our No Vacancy signs, to acknowledge our emptiness, so

that Christ can be born anew in our lives and in our world. The New Testament begins with the closed door in Bethlehem and ends with the verse from Revelation 3:20 "Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me." It suggests that this relentless love of God never stops knocking on the closed doors of our lives and of our world, always searching for a place for Christ to be born.

Fast forward 30 years to Luke 22:7-13, "Then came the day of Unleavened Bread on which the Passover lamb had to be sacrificed. Jesus sent Peter and John, saying, "Go and make preparations for us to eat the Passover. "Where do you want us to prepare it?" they asked. He replied, "As you enter the city, a man carrying a jar of water will meet you. Follow him to the house that he enters, and say to the owner of the house, "The Teacher asks: Where is the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?" He will show you a large room upstairs, all furnished. Make preparations there." They left and found things just as Jesus had told them. So they prepared the Passover."

I don't think it's a coincidence that Luke used the same Greek word, 'kataluma' to describe the guestroom in which there was no room for Jesus to be born and the guestroom in which he shared the Passover with his disciples on the night before he died. The One for whom there was no guestroom in Bethlehem now invites his followers into the guestroom where, as the host at the table, he takes bread, blesses it, breaks it, gives it to them, and says, "This is my body, which is given for you." He takes the cup and says, "This cup is the new covenant by my blood, which is poured out for you." In that upper room, around that last Passover table, confronted with the astonishing self-giving love of God in Christ, we are invited to take down the No Vacancy signs and allow Christ to come in. It is the place where the love that became flesh in Jesus becomes flesh in us.

There may not be an innkeeper in the gospel, but because he is so much like so many of us, he continues to haunt our Advent journey.