

No Vacancy

A Sermon on Luke 2:1-7

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It has happened to us four times. Arriving well after dark, we discovered Duluth MN filled with “No Vacancy” signs; so, we spent the night in the car, at an interstate rest area, swatting mosquitoes and flies. The “No Vacancy” sign was lit when got to Charleston SC; another night in the car, in a major hotel’s parking lot, one eye open after noticing drug deals going down. We saw nothing but “No Vacancy” signs for 150 miles, all the way to where the road dead-ended in Yarmouth, NS; arriving at 1:00 A.M., one innkeeper did take pity and let us get three hours of shuteye in the room of a “no show,” before rising to catch the pre-dawn ferry to Bar Harbor ME. And the “No Vacancy” sign sat on the reception desk in San Antonio TX, even though we had a confirmed reservation. The convention hotel found an extra lamp, a couple of cots, two towels, and a meeting breakout room for us to sleep in. “Don’t worry,” the clerk at the desk said, “we’re not going to charge you for tonight.” I replied I already knew that.

Running into a “No Vacancy” sign when you are dog-tired from the day’s journey and need a hot shower, a nice supper, and a good night’s sleep, is no fun...no fun at all. But that is precisely what Mary and Joseph encountered upon reaching Bethlehem. As Luke so simply, artfully, and memorably puts it: “...she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

In our romanticized imaginations, we picture that scene as idyllic: the straw fresh, clean, sweet-smelling; the sheep baaing, the cows mooing, the doves cooing ever so gently; the innkeeper – that dear, sweet, old man – taking them in, humbly apologetic that the stable was the best he had left to offer. Modest accommodations to be sure, but at least the Holy Family was protected from the cold night air and provided a measure of privacy for the child’s delivery.

But Luke would find such a sentimentalized reading of the Christmas narrative unrecognizable. For him (a physician), Mary traveling that late in her pregnancy, giving birth amid the filth of barn animals, nowhere to rest her newborn except in a slobbery feeding trough was not a pretty picture. Indeed, to Luke, it was a shocking portrayal of all that is wrong in this world, where the poor are played like pawns, and prejudice coupled with power plague the oppressed.

Remember: the Holy Family were not traveling on vacation. They were not taking a little time off to get away for a while. Joseph was not traveling on business to a carpentry convention, accompanied by Mary wanting to get out of the house and have a little fun sight-seeing. About-to-become-parents do not venture far from home when their baby is due. Doctors today would not let Mary, at nine months pregnant, even board an airplane!

Yet here they are undertaking an arduous 100-mile, 5-day donkey ride; along the Jordan River, through the land of the hated Samaritans; across the barren Judean wilderness; the last 17 miles up the steep, dangerous, winding mountain road from Jericho to Jerusalem, where criminals hid, attacked, robbed, and left for dead – all when she could go into labor any minute.

Why? Luke makes clear they were forced. They had been ordered to do so. Caesar Augustus, the most powerful ruler on earth, the undisputed leader of the Empire, had issued a decree. All the world had no choice but to go to their ancestral homes and register to be taxed.

But that still begs the question. Such decrees typically would have required only Joseph, as the male head-of-household, to make the trip. Given her advanced condition, why was Mary even along? Why didn't she stay with her parents? Tradition has it that St. Joachim and St. Anne were Mary's parents.ⁱ But the Bible never mentions them – a curious omission. Had they kicked their daughter out upon learning she was pregnant but unmarried? Is that why Luke includes the strange detail in an earlier story about Aunt Elizabeth taking Mary in for three months?ⁱⁱ Or could it be that Mary feared staying alone in Nazareth lest, in Joseph's absence, she be accused of adultery and stoned or burned to death under the laws of Moses?

When the Holy Family reached Bethlehem, Luke writes: "there was no room for them in the inn." Question: why were they looking for lodging in an inn? In the first century, travelers stayed in homes -- with family, friends, even strangers. The law of hospitality required the welcoming of sojourners into people's homes, fed like honored guests, invited to stay the night, provisioned for the next day's travels. So, why was no one fulfilling the law? Why was no one in Bethlehem taking them in? Had word of Mary's pregnant-but-unmarried state reached Joseph's ancestral home ahead of them? Had his relatives heard from afar and already disowned them?

Whatever the case, Luke writes they went to the inn as their last option, hoping the innkeeper would have a vacancy. But that only raises another set of questions. If people on the road stayed in homes, who rented rooms at inns? Answer: merchants and their entourages, traveling in numbers for safety's sake, too many people in a group to stay in anyone's home, too many animals for hosts to bed. Inns accommodated caravans.

I once meandered through the ruins of a caravansary in Turkey, built during the Ottoman Empire. A gate opened into a central open-air courtyard where the camels, horses, donkeys, oxen, sheep, and goats were watered, fed, and kept overnight. Circling the open courtyard were adjoining rooms with bunks for the camel-pullers, horse groomsmen, cattle drivers, sheep herders, and freight handlers. None of these rooms had doors – the innermost side of each room left open so that the laborers could keep watch on the animals during the night. Then

there was another set of rooms, attached to the outermost side of the doorless rooms, away from the central animal yard, for the caravan owners, merchants, and paid passengers riding with them. New Testament scholars Marcus Borg and John Dominic Crossan write that what Luke describes as the inn at Bethlehem is a primitive version of an Ottoman caravansary.ⁱⁱⁱ

If so, when we read that Mary “brought forth her firstborn son...and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn,” where should we put the emphasis? Would the innkeeper have found a room if they were traveling merchants? People of means? Could Luke want us to hear that “there was no place for them in the inn,” just like there was no place for them in the homes of Joseph’s relatives and their friends in Bethlehem, just like there was no place for Mary to stay back in Nazareth? Was it that the holy family had no option left but to bed down with the animals by the feeding pens – to give birth out in the open, perhaps under watching eyes -- because the powerful and prejudiced considered the poor and powerless, oppressed and marginalized, vulnerable and in need to be nothing more than animals?

That sounds too cruel to even imagine...until we remember -- in our own country, not that long ago, at the border – babies separated from immigrant parents, refugee children kept in cages, because America had no place for them.

Sometime after Jesus’ birth, according to Matthew, the Holy Family escaped to Egypt. Escaped what? King Herod’s angry rampage. The madness of King Herod’s executive order to slaughter every male child aged two and under. There is no getting around this historical fact: the one whose birth we celebrate on Christmas Eve was a refugee. If turned around upon arrival at the Egyptian border, if there was no room for them in the foreign nation to which they were fleeing, if sent back to Judea, a death sentence awaited their child. Thankfully, there was no “No Vacancy” sign at the border, like the ones we continue to hang out at ours.

The biblical Christmas story contains none of the sentiment of a Hallmark card. Its raw details describe the hard realities of life for the poor, subject to the prejudices of the religious culture, and to the actions of the secular powerful. It is the account of a family subjected to hatred by those believing themselves morally superior, and to the harshness created by inhuman policies.

But there also is good news tonight: Christmas Eve is about a God who, rather than being remote and distant, has chosen to be present in the realities of this world, in the difficulties people face, in the very worst of human experiences. It is a narrative about a God who enters solidarity with the vulnerable, the threatened, and the suffering. It is an account which reminds us that God never puts out the “No Vacancy” sign...and neither should we.

ⁱ The apocryphal *Protoevangelium of James* (circa. 145 AD)

ⁱⁱ Luke 1:56

ⁱⁱⁱ *The First Christmas: What the Gospels Really Teach About Jesus’ Birth* (page 150)