

Whenever we are faced with having to make plans for a trip or a holiday vacation, there are all kinds of preparations that need to be made to help make the journey a successful one. If we will be traveling far, we will most likely need to purchase airline tickets. And if we want to get a good deal on them, we will want to buy them sooner than later. Depending on how long we are going to be gone, we will need to make sure we get the right days off from work.

If you are anything like my wife and I, and have a zoo filled with pets at home, you may need to find someone to house sit while you are gone! Of course, there is also packing to be done, *household* chores to finish up, and a last-minute list of instructions to write for that naive and innocent animal sitter that you suckered into taking care of those four legged companions. But wait, did you remember to book a hotel room so that you have a place to stay when you arrive at your final destination?

In our Gospel story this evening, it would appear that Joseph, Mary's soon to be husband, has done just that, he has forgotten to make reservations at an Inn in Bethlehem. Of course, he didn't have the convenience of the internet with websites like Expedia or hotels.com at his disposal, and it wasn't like he could just pick up a copy of the yellowpages and make a phone call to reserve a room either. Let's also not forget that the poor carpenter had a lot on his mind back then, what with his betrothed about to give birth to a child that was destined to be the savior of the world and all! So this evening as we prepare to travel on a journey back to that special moment in time, when Jesus the Christ child was born into the world, let us cut Joseph a little slack. After all, sometimes it is the things that go wrong, it is the unplanned events that happen that can make a trip so memorable, so unforgettable!

Tonight's story of Mary and Joseph and their journey to Bethlehem is a tale that most of us can probably recite or retell, even without a Bible in front of us. It is something that most of us have probably heard each and every year while attending a Christmas pageant, or a Christmas Eve worship service like the one we are at now. A decree is issued by Emperor Augustus that a census of the world is about to take place, and everyone needed to go to their own hometowns to register.

Being that Joseph was from the city of Bethlehem, and most likely owned some land there, he was required to go and take part in the government mandated survey. With his soon to be wife so far along in her pregnancy, and not wanting to miss the birth of God's son, he decided to take her with him. It is an excursion that will take them around a week to complete with Mary slowly and carefully riding a donkey to avoid miscarriage, and Joseph walking beside them throughout the 80 mile trek from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

When the two travelers finally arrive at their destination they discover, as it is written in Luke's gospel, that there is no room for them in the Inn. Ok, so was that just an oversight during Joseph's planning? Was it simply bad luck, or was it merely a coincidence, that with the massive amount of people coming to register for the census, that he and his fiancé couldn't find a place to stay? When I was younger I remember wondering, "If Mary was going to give birth to God's son wouldn't God have somehow made sure the Inn had a vacancy?" And yet, as we explore this evening's narrative, we will discover that the series of strange and unfortunate events that took place so long ago weren't all that strange, or unfortunate after all.

Recently as I preparing to write my sermon for tonight I came across a rather interesting article from *Christianity Today* with the title, "No Room in the What?" The Author Ben Witherington writes, "When it came time for Mary to deliver the baby, the Greek of Luke's text says, 'She wrapped him in cloth and laid him in a corn crib, as there was no room in the guest room.' Yes, you heard me right. Luke does not say there was no room in the inn. Luke has a different Greek word for inn, which he trots out in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The word he uses in our story kataluma, and it is the very word he uses to describe the room in which Jesus shared the Last supper with his disciples –it was the guest room of a house."

Apparently archeologists have discovered that homes in Bethlehem often had caves connected to them in the back of the house where they kept their prized ox or beast of burden, to keep it from getting stolen. The guest room was in the front of the house, the animal shelter in the back, and therefore Joseph and Mary had arrived too late to get the

guest room. Perhaps another prominent member of the household had already claimed it? I'm sure some of us can relate to this experience! How often had we arrived at a relative's house during the holidays to discover that Grandpa Joe has already taken the spare bedroom!

This theory changes the story considerably if we consider the idea that the carpenter, and his bride to be, were actually staying with family members, instead of at some random Inn. And that seems to make more sense considering the fact that Bethlehem was Joseph's hometown! If that were the case, then it wouldn't be hard for us to imagine his relatives finding a place for them in the back of the house. Witherington goes on to say, "perhaps seeing that Mary was close to labor, the family put the delivering mom in the already – unclean spot in the house, so as to avoid the ritual uncleanness of childbearing."

Despite the fact that there may not have been an actual inn or innkeeper in the Nativity story, I still think there is an important lesson to be learned tonight as we think about there being no room for Mary, Joseph, or more importantly there being no room for Jesus! The son of the most High God would be born in a lowly stable, in a cave at the back of someone's house where prized animals were typically kept. He would be laid to rest in a manger, a feeding trough typically used to provide barnyard creatures with food. It doesn't seem very fitting, or fair for a baby to be born under such circumstances. Especially when we know, that eventually, that newborn infant will later grow up to be the savior of the world!

Similarly I wonder if our own lives reflect the imagery found in tonight's Gospel story. Do we have room for Jesus in our hearts? Can we find a prominent place for him to reside in us as part of our daily existence, instead of keeping him out back in the barn with the animals, or tucking him away in some special spot until we need him? Is it possible for us, to also make room for others, who are a representation of Jesus on this earth? In Matthew's Gospel, when Jesus is saying goodbye to his followers, and informing them of his second coming, he reveals to his disciples that whenever they feed a hungry person, whenever they give water to someone who is thirsty, whenever they take care of a sick

person, whenever they welcome a stranger, that **He** is the recipient of those loving and caring actions!

These days sadly there still seems to be very little room for Jesus in people's lives. Some insist that the days surrounding our Lord's birthday not be called "Christmas," but rather "Winter Break." Some declare that we should wish others a Happy Holiday or a Seasons Greetings! Irreverent, and irrelevant Christmas cards fly off the shelves. The heroes of Christmas are Tiny Tim, Rudolph, Frosty, the Grinch and Santa. Could it be that the busyness that comes with the season, the hustle and bustle that exists in our lives throughout the year, could these things cause us to be indifferent or overly involved, do they prevent us from making room for Christ in our lives and in our hearts?

Christmas should be one of the happiest time of the year, but for many people it ends up being one of the saddest days. Perhaps Christmas, is not all you feel it ought to be. Maybe you're trying to be happy and so you attempt to find satisfaction in gifts and parties, but these things don't do much to cheer you up. Perhaps you're lonely this Christmas — because you have recently lost a loved one, or you are choosing to stay home to keep yourself and others safe by maintaining social distancing and other COVID guidelines. All the while it appears that everyone you know seems to have a house full of loved ones, but you're all alone. I have a word for you: Jesus is with you, and His name is "Emmanuel" — which means God with us.

The pastor of a small city church was looking over the cradle in the church's soon to be put away nativity scene, when he noticed that the baby Jesus was missing from among the figures. Immediately he turned and went outside and saw a little boy named Bobby from the neighbourhood pulling a shiny red wagon behind him.

As the boy got closer the Pastor could barely make out the figure of Jesus in the back of the wagon. Knowing that the property committee would want their baby back he walked up to Bobby and said, "I noticed Baby Jesus was missing from the manger, and now I see that you have him in your wagon. Would you kindly like to explain to me why you removed him from the Church?"

"Well, Pastor," Bobby said, "before Christmas I prayed to the Lord for a shiny, new, red wagon, and I promised Him that if he saw fit to get me one, I would give Him a ride. I had to keep my promise because He keeps His promises to me. I will put Him back in His manger now; he's had a nice long ride!"

Tonight as we gather to celebrate Christmas Eve we remember that Joseph and Mary went on a long ride too! We also find joy in unwrapping the precious gift that God gave to the world over two thousand years ago. Perhaps it might do us some good to learn that even though we may not always make room for Jesus in our lives, God will always make room for us! And perhaps if we can open up our hearts to him on an evening such as this, as we remember that night so long ago when Joseph and Mary made that memorable trip to Bethlehem and were visited by Shepherds with a message from an angel visitation, with God's help we can open our lives, our hearts, our souls to him tomorrow and all the days that follow. Amen.