

December 24, 2015 “Making Room”

I’ll start with a confession: for some reason, the world seems a little darker this year. It might be the shadows of pain since the attacks on Paris or Beirut, or the refugees fleeing Syria, people losing their life at sea, or the shootings in the United States, and others closer to home. Or maybe it’s the number of global “hotspots” there are in the Middle East, the Ukraine, and more... Or maybe....

Well, you probably get the picture. The world just now seems rather dark, even hostile. If only we had a seasonally appropriate story about Middle Eastern people seeking refuge, being turned away by the pain and judgment of others. And so I wonder what this Christmas will feel like when so much of the world seems to be in turmoil and the angel’s cry of “peace on earth” seems like more of a wish than a blessing and we who gather to sing carols, light our candles, and hear the Christmas story seem so very small against the backdrop of this troubled world.

So though this world be dark, it is not forsaken, and the headlines we read and worry about will have their day and then fade again against the backdrop of this story we’ve been telling now for nearly 2000 years. God loves this world! And God will not give up on it...or us. Moreover, God continues to come to love and bless this very world and invites us to do the same.

The story we heard from the gospel of Luke reminds me that amid world events there is a promise that God works among the seemingly small and insignificant to change the world.

So many of us struggle to see God amid the desolate headlines. So many more wonder where God is amid their own more private pain of ruptured relationships, lost loved ones, loneliness, illness, job loss, or depression. Or maybe it's just that we get caught up in the day-to-day routine of making ends meet that we have a hard time imagining that God could possibly make a difference in our world. Sure, maybe we believe in God *in general*, but sensing God's presence – let alone *seeing* God – in the nitty-gritty of our mundane lives seems a bit much.

Christmas is an occasion that has the potential to bring families together. Children stay up late and get cranky and fussy. Too much excitement is in the air. Tables may be crowded with guests ready to feast, and we juggle the politics of our conversations. There are cooks in the kitchen, and beverages shared in toasts and cheers. Phone calls and emails are sent to those who can't make the travels, and memories of Christmases past are celebrated, or even lamented. But it's about people, family, coming together. That's what it's like when families gather, the house overflows with people, and we make room.

In the Palestine of Herod the Great, families also looked out for their own. And extended families could get quite extended in some circumstances. This is what makes Mary and Joseph's dilemma such a problem, as Luke's gospel tells us that Mary, "gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

What were they doing in a stable with no bed for their baby but a manger, which is a polite word for a feed box? Where was their family? Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home. If Joseph had to go to Bethlehem, so would have his brother and sisters, father and mother, and his cousins, too. Each of them would have had to have found room in Bethlehem, and once they found room, they would have been obligated by duty to make room for Joseph and his very new, so obviously pregnant wife, Mary.

So why were Mary and Joseph in a stable? Perhaps the family had piled into the inn and Mary and Joseph were living in the overflow section. That explanation would work, except for Mary's pregnancy. Even an elderly uncle or an odd second cousin could have given up a bed for a woman on the verge of childbirth.

Mary and Joseph were in a stable as there was no room for them in an inn. The shepherds did not find a stable overflowing with extended family knocking themselves out to make some better arrangements for the new baby. The shepherds found a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. No mother-in-law,

no aunt, no cousins and no sisters-in-law. Just a very young mother, doing for her baby what she knew to be best, with the father trying to make things a bit better, the best he could under the circumstances.

Why this happened is a mystery. But what we know, and know with certainty, is that Mary and Joseph were left to fend for themselves. No family had made room for them in Bethlehem. In a town packed to the rafters with fellow ancestors of King David, no one could find room for Mary and Joseph, who had every reason to feel quite alone as they laid their baby in the manger.

Mary and Joseph were strangers, and no one invited them in. And those who shut their doors to Joseph as he looked for room for his great-with-child wife, were shutting their doors on God incarnate. When they did not make room for that one pregnant girl, they did not make room for the maker of heaven and earth to be born among us.

Yet, the story of Christmas is a story of good news of great joy for all people, not just those surrounded by family tonight, and not just those who will celebrate by exchanging expensive gifts. Christmas is exceedingly joyful good news because in coming to a couple who were themselves lost and left out, God turned the world upside down.

For the Christmas story did not start with Mary and Joseph alone in that stable in Bethlehem. Nor did the Christmas story begin with the angel appearing to

Mary, or even with the prophets who foretold of the event centuries earlier. The Christmas story began with God looking on creation, so lovingly made and so needlessly gone astray.

God's bold and daring plan was incarnation, the Word of God becoming human. In becoming human, God sided with the oppressed and the outcasts, by coming first to the poor, lowly and even despised people.

The idea of God becoming human in lowly circumstances is wondrous, for it means that God knows you and loves you even as you are, whether you spend tonight alone or trying to sleep on a fold-out couch in a house full of extended family. The miracle of Immanuel, "God-with-us," is that we see that though Mary and Joseph may have been forsaken by others, they were never forgotten by God.

Jesus was raised by Mary and Joseph – people with nothing but their love of God and neighbours to recommend them for the job. They had no status, no power and no wealth. The only thing they really had to offer was love. Having nothing to offer but love is exactly what the creator of heaven and earth had in mind all along.

And so we've heard this story once again not as a cherished favourite but rather so that it seeps into the dark crevices of our soul, the places we wonder if it can possibly be true, those spaces where the world's darkness seems so much more prominent than the light. Because that's what this story was made for – to shine

light in dark places, to bring hope to the discouraged, insight to the lost, and the promise of peace to all who long for it.

And we who gather tonight in the warm glow of the light of God's love should be challenged by this vision of a world turned right-side-up by a baby in a manger. For having seen that he who the universe could not contain may be found in a stable, and in the bread and wine of communion. How much better our eyes are to be focused on seeing our Lord in the people in need all around us. And it is this vision of the world that is indeed good news of great joy for all people. Amen.