

# “No Room in the Inn”

The Rev. S. Shane Nanney – December 24, 2021

Isaiah 2:9-7 and Luke 2:1-15

I would like to share a story with you that comes from Westminster Presbyterian Church in Trenton, New Jersey, about a little boy in their Sunday school program named Wally. Now, Wally was kind of big for his age of nine years old. He was kind of a slow learner, but he had a very big heart. And because of that, most of the children really liked him. His parents were wondering what part Wally might have in the Christmas play. They thought perhaps he'd be a stagehand, or maybe a curtain puller. Since he was kind of a big boy. Everyone was delighted to find out that he was cast in the part of the innkeeper, he only had to appear in one scene, and he only had to deliver one line, “Sorry, there's no room in the inn.” Wally had his lines down in no time.

When Christmas Eve comes, his parents and grandparents are seated in the audience and the children process in with everyone singing “OH, COME ALL YE FAITHFUL,” the lights dim, and a hush settles over the group. The play begins with the familiar words of the narrator, “THIS IS HOW THE BIRTH OF THE MESSIAH HAPPENED. IN THOSE DAYS, CAESAR AUGUSTUS ISSUED A DECREE THAT A CENSUS SHOULD BE TAKEN OF THE ENTIRE ROMAN WORLD.” The curtain opened and in walked Mary and Joseph to the front desk of the inn. Joseph asked Wally, “Could we have a room for the night? My wife is about to give birth?” But Wally stumbled over his lines, he said, “There is ... there is.... there is.” Everyone felt sorry and embarrassed for Wally. But the little guy playing Joseph was as sharp as a tack and he decided to improvise it. He just lowered his head and he and Mary walked away in a very forlorn manner toward the scenery of a stable. It was like a blanket of sadness just came over everyone and it especially came over Wally. Now everyone breathed a sigh of relief and was glad that Joseph was quick on his feet. But then poor Wally in desperation blurted out, “Look, there's plenty of room at my place, just come on home with me.”

Now, that's a delightful twist on the familiar story where the roles are clearly defined. You know, Herod is the villain. The innkeeper appears to be uncaring, and cold. The shepherd and the magi are the heroes of the story. And Mary and Joseph were the faithful ones who were willing to endure whatever came their

way. But maybe the innkeeper gets a bad rap. Was it really his fault that the inn was filled up? Caesar had ordered this census of the entire Roman world and Mary and Joseph arrived late in the middle of the night. Was it really his fault? When you look at the other characters in the Christmas story, they all have an advantage that the innkeeper didn't have. Mary had an angel visit her and explain to her that she was going to give birth to the Messiah. Joseph had an angelic vision in his dream, where it was explained to him. The shepherds had all of the heavenly choir proclaiming the Messiah's birth, and even the magi had the help of a star. Now, I bet if the innkeeper had been given an angelic messenger, giving him the heads up, I'm sure he would have reserved a spot for them.

You see, friends, the innkeeper represents all of us. The innkeeper represents every believer, because most of the time, we're not going to have a heads up that Jesus is going to come knocking on the door of our life and ask if we have any room for him. Just like the innkeeper, we're not going to be given any special revelation or preparation. Instead, when we're in the midst of a very busy time in our life, Jesus is going to show up unannounced to test our faithfulness. And our faithfulness gets tested by how we respond to people in need. Because we're going to see Jesus in the face of the poor, the homeless, the hungry, the immigrant, the powerless, and the less fortunate. We're going to see Jesus in the face of people who are being treated unfairly and in need of an advocate. And our faithfulness is measured by how we respond to these people and oftentimes, those tests will come late in a very harried season of our lives where we're tired and irritable, and we're doing everything we can to just keep up . . . just like the innkeeper. That's when Jesus is most likely to show up and ask, "Do you have any room for me?"

The idea that there is no room for Jesus would become a recurring theme throughout the book of Luke. Once Jesus began His earthly ministry, there was no room for him in his hometown of Nazareth. There was no room for him in the religious community because the chief priests had rejected him outright. There wasn't going to be any room in the economic world, because according to Jesus, the purpose of wealth was to give it away. And there certainly was not going to be room for him in polite society, because he hung out with sinners, and prostitutes and tax collectors. He actually sought these people out.

But somehow, he attracted a following that grew into a movement that became a world-wide religion. Because the people who did make room for him

underwent a profound change of heart. In Jesus, they found peace, joy, hope, and love. Soon Christmas will be over, and it will be back to life as usual. Have you made room for Jesus, tonight? Will you make room for Jesus in the unexpected busy times of your life?

Rev. Tim Walker tells this story about what happened to him on December 23, 2008. “I got a call from a woman who lived in Columbus, Ohio. Her son lived out of state in a rural area where I was pastoring. Her son had just gotten out of the psych unit, he had tried to commit suicide. And since she could not go and physically check on him, she asked me if I would go do that. Now, of course, I was very busy with Christmas Eve plans. I was in a very stressful spot in my life, but nevertheless, I made time to go check on him and report back to his mother. When I got to the door, and I knocked, he answered the door and said very gruffly, “What do you want?” I explained to him that I was there on behalf of his mother who wanted to know how he was doing, and whether he needed to talk. He said, “I don't want to talk to anyone.” As he slammed the door in my face he said, “And tell my mother to stay out of my life.” Of course, he sprinkled in a few expletives. I went back to my car, and I said, “Well, Lord, I tried. It's now up to you,” and I went on with business as usual.

366 days later, on Christmas eve of 2009, I received a letter in the mail. I could tell it was a fairly thick letter and I saw there was no return address on the envelope. Now, pastors get those kinds of letters every so often, without a return address. And that's always a clear indication that whatever is on the inside of that envelope is going to be very interesting. It might be good, it might be bad, but it's definitely going to be interesting. So, I opened the letter and read it. Turns out, it's from this man who had slammed the door in my face. He started off by apologizing for the way he acted and then he thanked me for coming out to check on him. He went on to say that he decided to get help and take the advice of the counselors and the doctors, and he credited me and my visit as the thing that changed his mind. That short, brief, seemingly unsuccessful visit prompted him to get the help that he needed, and he thanked me for it. Best Christmas gift ever!

You see friends in the very busy and stressful times of our lives, Jesus is going to show up in the face of the poor and the needy and he's going to ask us, “Do you have any room for me?” What will your answer be? Amen.