

IN THOSE DAYS
(2) NO PLACE FOR THEM

Luke 2:5-7

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SCRIPTURE

[Joseph] went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she 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 (Luke 2:5-7 NRSV).

MESSAGE

The prophet Micah had predicted that the Messiah, who would say to us, "I am the bread of life," would be born in Bethlehem – a name that means, "House of Bread." Joseph and Mary were on their way to Bethlehem to comply with the requirements of a census. Our Scripture passage says that they were engaged to be married but a better term would be betrothed. This was more than an engagement but not quite a full marriage.

Nevertheless, Mary was with child. As the couple arrives in the city, the time comes for the child's arrival. The text describes the arrival in simple terms: "And she 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" (2:7).

"There was no place for them" (2:7). With these six words Luke captures the impact of the birth of Jesus. It's a phrase that tells us a great deal about who we are, who Jesus is, and what God was willing to do to redeem us. "There was no place for them."

First of all, it says something about who we are. It speaks to the human condition. In Luke's account, the power of Caesar Augustus is contrasted with the weakness of the baby Jesus. But looks are deceiving. The firstborn son of Mary is also the very Son of God. He is the Alpha and the Omega, Creator of the universe, and Supreme Ruler of all that lives.

On the night of Christmas Eve many years ago, I was privileged to be in Bethlehem to celebrate the birth of Christ. The church was packed with people from all around the world. I happened to be in the front pew next to a young American woman who, like myself, was a college student studying and traveling overseas. During a break in the service I said to her, "All this fuss over a little baby!" She turned and smiled at me and said, "No. All this fuss over God!"

So what do we have to contemplate this Christmas? God! Nothing less than God.

But this begs the question, “If Jesus is the very Son of God then how does he deserve to be received?” He deserves to have every person from every land come and worship him. He deserves to have every living creature in the universe come to his cradle and give him praise. He deserves to have creation itself cry glory. Anything less is an insult to his divine dignity.

But how is he received? How is he welcomed into this world? “There was no place for them.” Here is the great irony. When the Son of God came to earth – the Creator of the vast and immense universe – he couldn’t even get a room!

The inn that is mentioned here should not be taken as the equivalent of a five star hotel or even an Airbnb. It would have been a guest house – primitive, squalid and dirty by our standards. Whether other relatives had arrived earlier and filled the place up or Mary and Joseph were delayed and so their room was given to another we do not know. But by the time they did arrive there was no place for them except in the stable. This is suggested by the use of the word manger. A manger is an animal's feeding trough, which means the family is in a stable or in a cave where animals are housed. (By the way, this also tells us how they figured out Jesus’ weight as an infant. They got “a weigh in a manger.”)

The (implied) innkeeper is not really the villain in the story. But he does represent us. We, like him, are too busy and distracted to notice what is important.

The Son of God was born in Bethlehem unrecognized and unwelcome. Indeed, he was rejected all through his ministry. He was driven out of his hometown. His family thought he was crazy. People at first liked his miracles but stayed away in droves when he started talking about suffering and sacrifice. The religious leaders rejected his claims and grew to hate him. It wasn’t just Bethlehem – there was never room for Jesus. As one commentator put it, “When Christ first came among us we pushed him into an outhouse; and we have done our best to keep him there ever since.”¹

The way Jesus was shoved aside should make us upset. But honestly, would our welcome have been any different? The nativity shows us the human condition. It shows us that we have turned from God. We have rejected God. But it also reminds us of our desperate need for God’s help.

What kind of welcome are you giving Jesus right now? Have you made room for him in

¹ Ryken, P. G. (2009). *Luke* (R. D. Phillips, P. G. Ryken, & D. M. Doriani, Eds.) (Vol. 1, p. 72). Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing.

your heart? Does he have a place in your daily routines? Is there any space for him in your life? Jesus does not deserve to be shoved aside. He came to fill your life with mercy and grace. He came to set you free from sin.

In order to do that he had to become one of us. The phrase, “There was no place for them,” not only tells us something about ourselves but it also tells us something about Jesus, specifically the humanity of Jesus. Do you believe in the humanity of Jesus?

Like all births, his entrance into this world was messy and undignified. Mary wiped him and wrapped him in bands of cloth and prayed with all her heart that the child would live. Kent Hughes puts it this way:

Imagine the “sweat and pain and blood and cries as Mary reached up to the heavens for help. The earth was cold and hard. The smell of birth mixed with the stench of manure and acrid straw made a contemptible bouquet. Trembling carpenter’s hands, clumsy with fear, grasped God’s Son slippery with blood—the baby’s limbs waving helplessly as if falling through space—his face grimacing as he gasped in the cold and his cry pierced the night.”¹

The most popular Christmas carol of all time is, “Silent Night.” But it is a highly romanticized account of the nativity. As all parents of newborns know, there is no such thing as a silent night. Andrew Peterson has written a song called, “Labor of Love” that is more realistic:

It was not a silent night
There was blood on the ground
You could hear a woman cry
In the alleyways that night
On the streets of David’s town

And the stable was not clean
And the cobblestones were cold
And little Mary full of grace
With the tears upon her face
Had no mother’s hand to hold

Do you believe that the Son of God, the Second Person of the Trinity was once a babe in

¹ Ryken, pp. 70–71.

his mother's arms, nursing at her breast? This is what we mean by the incarnation. God became a flesh and blood human being. What it teaches us is this. God chose to save us, not from a distance, but by coming as close as possible to us and our condition.

The phrase, "There was no place for them," tells us something about ourselves. It tells us something about Jesus. And it tells us something about God's willingness to redeem us.

There is great humility here. Please understand. God is not just a bigger and better version of ourselves. God is altogether different. God's attributes are infinitely superior to our own. God is the Creator, we are the creatures. For God to take on human flesh was an act of infinite humility.

It was also an intentional act. Christ knew he could only save us by suffering and dying for our sins. He showed this from the beginning. The humility of his birth became the pattern for his whole life. The same body wrapped in swaddling clothes would one day be wrapped in a burial shroud.

His humility became the basis for our salvation and the model for our response. We need to admit our need for God, believe that Jesus died for our sins and was raised from the dead, and commit ourselves to him in humble service. Jesus tells us:

All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted (Matt 23:12 NRSV).

And elsewhere he says:

Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light" (Matt 11:29-30 NRSV).

There is divinity in humility. We must never forget that although Jesus is the Son of God and our Savior, he was wrapped in torn pieces of cloth and laid in a manger, because there was no room in the inn. The question is, "Will we make room for him now?"