



We Make Room

Luke 2: 1-20

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Again, good evening. It is truly a blessing to be gathered with you on this Christmas Eve night.

You know, it's often hard to write the Christmas Eve sermon. The story itself is one of the most familiar in our knowledge of Scripture. Even if you're just listening to Christmas songs on the radio, everyone seems to know about Bethlehem, the star, the angels and the shepherds, the manger, and the Magi (or wisemen) who eventually show up.

And yet, for as simple and well-known as the story may appear, it carries with it some great depth, and is filled with layers of invitation and promise. As we rehear the story tonight and consider the joy that enters the world in the birth of Christ, I'd like to frame our focus on the manger using the question that has guided our worship through the past four weeks of Advent: *How does a weary world rejoice?*

How does a weary world rejoice?

Luke's gospel is the only one of the four that includes such depth of detail regarding the birth of Jesus. The story *begins* with a political agenda, where the Emperor Augustus required everyone to return to the town of their family origin to be counted in a census. In his commentary on this text, the scholar, Justo Gonzalez, notes that "A census had sinister implications. It was not just counting people in order to see how many they were, and what population trends were. In ancient times, and long thereafter, a census was in fact an inventory of all the wealth of a region ... so that the government would be able to tax people to the maximum."¹ It was this sinister political agenda that led Joseph and the very pregnant Mary, to whom Joseph was betrothed, to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

Luke had earlier shared the significance of Joseph's connection to Mary; it was his role as Mary's husband that would connect Jesus back to King David. Their travelling to Bethlehem during the census further affirms this connection, as Bethlehem was the City of David.

Perhaps we are familiar with the kind of weariness that comes from the sinister intentions of political agendas. It doesn't seem to matter which side of the partisan dichotomy you claim as your own, people in every corner of the American political spectrum feel a way about the political landscape of our nation right now. I have found it rare to meet anyone who isn't weary, at least to an extent, of the political division our nation is facing.

Perhaps we find ourselves wondering this Christmas, how does a weary world rejoice in the midst of such a challenging political environment?

How does a weary world rejoice?

When Joseph and Mary reached Bethlehem, we are told that 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.

We often imagine that upon arriving in Bethlehem, the holy couple saw the “no vacancy” light was on at the local motel. Yet, as Luke tells the story, the “inn” was not really a hotel or motel as we understand it today. We’re not talking about the Alexandrian or even the Motel 6. Given the Greek he uses, coming from the word *kataluma*, Luke is more likely referring to a guest room – or even a living room – in a family house. Remember, this is the place of Joseph’s family; he would have had family in the area to stay with. Yet, there was no available space in the house when Joseph and Mary showed up, and so they were given the barn.

Can you imagine, even if you didn’t know that the child she carried was to be God incarnate, that the family with whom they were staying didn’t change things around to make room for the pregnant woman to give birth inside? Perhaps we should be reminded that Joseph and Mary were not yet married. Luke reminds us of that in this text, writing, “Joseph went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was *engaged* and who was expecting a child.” It was a major social faux pas for a man to be marrying a woman who was pregnant with someone else’s child. Were it his child, they would already be married. But this is not the case. It would not be unusual for the family to have some unfavorable opinions about their relationship given the circumstances of her unexpected pregnancy.

Perhaps we are familiar with the kind of weariness that comes from the unfavorable opinions of family and friends who disagree with our current status, identity, or situation. It is not uncommon to have parents and relatives voice their disagreement with occupational choices. It is not uncommon to hear of family members spewing vitriol towards others because of their relationships. It is, sadly, too common an occurrence to learn that there is no welcome place at the homestead for those who envision their own future in a very different way than was projected by their family.

Perhaps we find ourselves wondering this Christmas, how does a weary world rejoice in the midst of facing such challenging family relationships?

How does a weary world rejoice?

After Jesus is born, Luke’s narrative takes us out into the fields where there were shepherds keeping watch over their flock by night. The job of a shepherd was a thankless job, and often relegated to the most unfavored of the community. The shepherds would have been considered outcasts, uneducated, and undesirable. As they stood in the fields that night, we can imagine it would have been quite dark; the fleece of the sheep would have been only visible by the dim light provided by the moon and the stars.

“Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.” The shepherds would not have been expecting company, and probably didn’t favor

unexpected visitors in the fields while they were keeping watch of the sheep. The angel sensed their fear, and said to them, “ ‘Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news and great joy for all people; to you is born this day in the city of David a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly, there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ‘Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’”

It was uncommon for the shepherds to be promised any news, much less good news from a host of angels who were praising God and calling them favored. Such a proclamation is offered here in the Gospel of Luke to those who are the most weary of us all.

It may be uncommon (for many of us) to share in the weariness of the shepherds. These folks were the outcasts of the community, again, unwelcomed and unwanted. They held the jobs that no one else desired; jobs which kept them out of sight from the public eye. They would have been weary from the manual labor and endless days and nights of wandering the hills of the Judean countryside tending the flock. They would have been weary from the disgust they experienced when in a public venue. They would have been weary by the way they were treated and viewed among the community.

Perhaps we find ourselves wondering this Christmas, how does a weary world rejoice when so many members of our community are facing such rejection and abandonment?

How does a weary world rejoice?

There are many reasons we may find ourselves weary of the world in which we live. Whether the reasons be political or personal ... societal or structural ... familial or communal ... in the midst of our weariness, we find that God shows up and makes room for those who are weary.

For Mary and Joseph, in the midst of a political census, and despite the family drama that relegated them to the stable – Jesus is born, wrapped in swaddling clothes, and laid in a manger. God makes room and provides a way when there seemed to be no room and no way. For the unwed couple, for the young mother, for the unexpected pregnancy: God makes room for them. God centers them and uses them to give life to Emmanuel, who is God-incarnate.

For the shepherds in the field, for those who were considered outcasts and unwanted by the community, God invites them to be the first to stand at the side of Jesus in the manger. God makes room for those who were *never* invited into the room.

The shepherds go to Bethlehem, and they find Mary and Joseph, and Jesus in the manger, just as the angels had proclaimed. They shared with Mary and Joseph what the angels had told them, and Mary treasured their words. When the shepherds returned to the fields, “they went forth glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.”

Something changes in us when we find that room has been made for us. Even in the midst of our weariness, when we find that room has been made for *us*, we find ourselves filled with joy in a way we had never experienced joy before.

This is the good news we celebrate at Christmas, that in the birth of Christ, God is making room for all who are weary. But even beyond making room, the Christmas story “witnesses to the simple yet scary fact that God didn’t come in Jesus to make things a little better, a little more bearable. God came to turn over the tables, to create a whole new system, to resurrect and redeem us rather than merely rehabilitate us.”ⁱⁱ God didn’t just come to make room for the weary, God came to give new life to the weary – to fill us with a joy we didn’t know possible. So that, witnessing and encountering God in Jesus, we might be filled with a hope to go forth into the world, glorifying and praising God.

This Christmas, may you be filled with such a hope to rejoice and to celebrate the work of God in the world. For tonight is born in Bethlehem, a savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord Emmanuel, God with us who has made room for all who are weary. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Justo L. Gonzalez. *Luke: Belief, A Theological Commentary on the Bible*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010.

ⁱⁱ David Lose. “Commentary on Luke 2:1-20.” <http://workingpreacher.com>. Retrieved December 20, 2023.