

We Make Room
Christmas Eve Homily
Sermon 209 | Greystone Baptist Church | December 24, 2023
Luke 2:1-20

There is a cute little children's book that I love to read. One of my sisters gave it to Mia when she was about 5 or 6. It's called *Ten Monsters in the Bed*, and it starts out with this big picture of a colorful bunk bed, filled with little monsters, from one side to the next.

"Ten noisy monsters were tucked up face to face." The story begins, with words printed across that colorful picture. *"We're really squished," they said, "we need a bit more space."*

Now I don't want to spoil anything, so I'm not going to tell you what kinds of noises these *noisy* monsters make, or how everything plays out, but I will tell you that before too long the noisy monsters start to annoy one another and they realize they need a little more room if they're going to get any sleep in that bed. So they find ways to kick one off or conveniently not help one get back on when it falls.

"We are really squished!" They say... "we need a bit more space!"

Maybe you feel that way in your pews tonight? Maybe you feel that way in the houses you left to come here, as family has gathered together and space is running a little short? Maybe you feel that way with your budget as you've finished up all the Christmas shopping and bought all the food for the big meal? Maybe you feel that way in your body as the holiday diet is *already* setting in? Maybe you feel that way in your spirit as you search for a nook or a cranny... a small corner of your heart for God to dwell within? No room! We say.

The calendar is too full, our lives are too busy. We cannot take in anymore information, we're already overloaded, overwhelmed, and overcrowded... in every sense of the word. No room... nope... no more... We are at capacity.

(...probably why we are so weary)

If only we had a barn out back, a spiritual storage room – you might say – like the innkeeper in the Christmas pageants who's more conventional guest spaces are full. (You've all seen the "no vacancy" signs in the pageants, you know what I'm talking about.) If only we had a space like that, a third space, an extra space, a designated place for Jesus to be born, to grow up, to live within us... wouldn't that be grand?

Well... I hate to burst our bubble... Especially on Christmas Eve. But there is no such thing as a detached spiritual storage unit. Just like there was no such thing as an innkeeper in Luke's version of the birth of Jesus. Sorry... Hate to burst our bubble.

But it seems that our modern minds, lack of familiarity with ancient Palestinian architecture and culture, and our general limitations with biblical Greek might be getting in the way of the real story here. Because the way Luke describes the journey it sounds like Mary and Joseph are going back home. (Not to a town where they don't know anyone.)

The whole reason for their movement from Nazareth in Galilee is because of the census - which required people to register in their home town. So Joseph, with his beloved in tow, goes home, to where all his people are from.

That being the case, the first hearers of this story, the first readers of Luke's Gospel would expect that Joseph, a son of the house of David, would be welcomed with open arms. Maybe it will be his parents or grandparents, or second cousins, we can't be sure, but *someone* in that town will know this man and will welcome him, offering a place to stay and a warm meal to fill his belly.

One biblical scholar says it this way: "When a self-respecting 'son of the village' returns to the town of his origins in the Middle East, a royal welcome always awaits him."¹

But that is not the reception they get.

As it turns out, Mary and Joseph find themselves in a *kaTA-luma*. A Greek word that is translated as "inn" in our Bibles. But it is not the same word that Luke will use a few chapters later in the story about the good Samaritan, that will be a *pando-kheion*. The latter being the more common word for commercial residences like motels or hospitals, the *kataluma* is more commonly used to refer to a guest room attached to a house. This is how Luke himself uses the word in chapter 22 where disciples are told to "follow a man carrying a jar of water and on arrival at his house to ask: *where is the kaTA-luma* where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?"² [this time, translated as "guest room"]

So when we say that Jesus was wrapped in cloths and laid in manger, because there was no room... we should really think... no room in the guest-room, not no room in the inn, the Motel 6 or Marriott center city.

The guest room was actually a pretty critical part of hospitality in the ancient world. And Because we all know that this story long predates the establishment of the commercial hotels that we love to stay in, to understand *this* story, we have to recognize that when

¹ <https://pres-outlook.org/2006/12/the-manger-and-the-inn-a-middle-eastern-view-of-the-birth-story-of-jesus/>

² *Ibid.*

Mary and Joseph went down to Bethlehem, they didn't check into a hotel lobby, no, they sought refuge in an ordinary home.

And if that home was indeed *ordinary*, it would have been a one-ish room, split-level structure with 80 percent of the space being a sort of raised terrace where the family would cook, eat, and live. Step down a couple of steps into the remaining 20 percent of the house and you would find yourself amongst the animals. Not a huge herd, but you know, the family cow, maybe a donkey and a few sheep. All of which would be brought indoors for the night and let out in the morning (every. single. day.).

Because the animals lived in the house too, there would be a trough built into the floor of the raised terrace holding hay and other food for the animals, in case they got hungry at night. This trough, called a manger, was about 3 or 4 feet off the ground from where the animals stood. So they could reach it at night even though it was built into the floor of the family room on the upper level.

If a home was big enough for a guest room, that might be added onto the roof, or a side. But most ordinary homes were one room structures where family and animals resided.

With all this in mind, it makes perfect sense that when Joseph arrived back in his hometown, this time with Mary who was well into her pregnancy, they would have been welcomed by someone - because Joseph was a son of the village - and this kind of hospitality was expected in their culture. It was the tie that held it all together.

So can't we just imagine someone greeting this weary pair at the threshold and saying: *This house is full, there's no room in the guest room. But we will make room here in the main room. Because you are welcome here.*

It may seem like a minute little detail. One that may only help you out with small talk when you're hanging out with pastors or playing trivia with a religious crowd, but if we allow this information to settle in just a bit, we might find that our modern lenses are getting in the way of more than just a precisely accurate translation.

You see, devoted and religious as we may be - I am not convinced that we have actually made room for Jesus. At least not in the way that this ancient and ordinary homeowner made room. I suspect that we, more often, do what modern people do when we run out of physical space. Instead of making room - we build detached garages... Spiritually speaking, of course.

You see, when our spaces get crowded, we build new or bigger ones. Maybe it's a storage unit at first, then a garage, then an extra bay on our garage, then it's a tiny home (we call the she-shed or the man cave, or the guest house) that we have place out back... separate from the main house. And as we do this, we segment and separate our regular lives from those less convenient responsibilities and visitors. *Isn't it nice when the in-laws and second cousins can stay in the guest quarters rather than crashing on the couch?*

But the problem is - at least where the incarnation of God in Luke's Gospel is concerned - that Jesus wasn't born out back. Jesus was born right in the middle, and friends, I am increasingly convinced that Christ still longs to reside right in the center of things. And this is a problem for us because if we are to take an honest look at ourselves and our world we would have to confess that we do not have room for Christ to be born here, tonight. I mean, even if we could squeeze the little babe in somewhere, he would be stuffed right in between some things I'm not sure we would want the incarnate God to see, at least not on first impression.

Can you imagine the little babe opening those tiny, holy, newborn eyelids and taking in the stuff that occupies the center of our hearts and the heart of our world. With all of our greed and materialism, all of our extra little comforts that so often come at the expense of the working poor (here and abroad). And as soon as we could get over that, what would the holy child think of our hateful rhetoric and the prejudice it would expose? And What of the wars that we start, support, encourage, and enable? Even more, what of the violence in our schools, in our streets, ... and in our hearts.

No, this is not a place into which Christ *should* be born. ... even if there *was* room in between all that other stuff.

Sadly though, this is not a new phenomenon. It was almost 80 years ago when Thomas Merton famously wrote that

"We live in the time of no room...[and yet] into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it — because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it — his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are regarded as weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, and who are tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world."³

Eighty years have passed since those words were penned and we have so little to show for ourselves in the way of progress. It would be easy for us to make excuses about how little we actually can control. Who are we to stop the wars that rage in Africa, the Middle East, Europe, and in many of our own streets? What can we do to end racism and sexism and classism and all the other forms of prejudice that have taken up permanent residence in our societies? How are we to bring an end to the insatiable greed that keeps our economies going all the while forgetting about the poor who work tirelessly to keep things moving along? These systems are too big for us to fix. These problems are outside of our control.

But then we remember that more than two-thousand years ago, on a night like this, there was a little baby born in the ordinary *living room* of a no-name family in the backwoods

³ Thomas Merton. *Raids on the Unspeakable*. 51-52. Retrieved from <https://cct.biola.edu/uninvited-christ-thomas-merton-meaning-no-room-inn/>

town of Bethlehem. Right smack dab in the middle of everything else that was going on in that busy and full house.

And that baby changed the world.

It didn't take the whole town, or the whole region, or even a whole nation of people committed to making room. It just took one common homeowner with a spot on the floor.

How does a weary world rejoice? *We make a little room.*

Lord help us!!!

Amen.