

Sermon: Any Room?
Luke 2:7

And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

With that one line in the birth narrative of Jesus, we have made an entire character of the Christmas story.

The Inn Keeper has appeared in movies, in Christmas pageants, makes a cameo in many a Christmas Eve sermons... and the ironic truth is that there is no Innkeeper in the Bible... just the words **“She wrapped him in swaddling cloths and placed him in the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”** But let’s be honest: There is no way Joseph and nine month pregnant Mary saw a “No Vacancy” sign outside “The Bethlehem Inn” and did not park the donkey and at least ask somebody. There had to be an Innkeeper.

Authors of books believe there was an innkeeper. On Amazon today, you can buy books with titles “The Innkeeper, The Innkeeper’s Bench, The Innkeeper in Bethlehem, even a book titled The Innkeeper’s Journal. We don’t know who he was, but we have his journal.”

And here we are today... 12 days away from Christmas, obsessed with a character that is not even in the original story. What is it with our human nature that we have to know why the innkeeper did not have any room and booted the holy family outside with the barnyard animals?

It does not help our investigative work, that this idea of a room and an inn can have several meanings as well. Was Joseph and Mary stopping at antiquity’s equivalent of a Bed and Breakfast? Or did they get the snub from the extended family who had an extra guest room? Was the room really nothing more than a cave on the boundary line of someone’s property? I could keep my questions coming, but there is only one question I really have this morning: Why did the innkeeper have no room for Joseph and Mary? I have been giving this question some thought this week. Maybe the innkeeper was busy.

I know the innkeeper has been portrayed as the villain of Christmas, but I can hear his voice among us this morning: Try running an inn during a last minute government decreed census... and to top it off, nine months ago, the touring group from Greece booked four rooms at my place—their only performance in Jerusalem—and now this is my luck: same date as the census. My place is not very big, not like those inns in Jerusalem. A few years back, I thought I could make a profit if I extended the home—made a wing with 12 rooms. I really have not seen a great profit—still paying the bank back for the initial loan. The Mrs. and I do our best for our clients but there are some days that I wish I never would have decided to be a small business owner.

So if you are asking me about that specific night, the census night during the time Quirinius was governor, all I can tell you is that I was up to my head in busyness and details. If it was like other peak times, I imagine I did not even eat dinner that evening.

And please don’t ask about any customer or potential client. A busy innkeeper can barely remember a face... so many coming and going... the only faces I do

remember are those of customers who are always griping, complaining, thinking they are the only ones in the inn.

So if you are asking about a young Jewish couple where the woman was pregnant—No... No I don't remember them! If you think it was cold and callous not to give them a room that night, all I can say is that I am sorry. It was some chaotic night from what I remember. The Roman government was in town, making demands of everyone on my staff. Make sure there are enough muffins at breakfast. Get extra towels for the commander in room 108. Why is the fireplace not working? It was busy and I did not have time to find another room for just any ordinary couple, pregnant or not.

Maybe it was the busyness that kept the innkeeper from finding room for the Savior of the world. We know what it is to be busy, to have deadlines, to have constituents and clients breathing down our neck with demands.

Especially this year. I know we are only 12 days away from Christmas, but the local high school football team's season has not even ended. I know how it is—I have a child in the band, and your son is one of the kids on the offensive line. Three hour trips many weekends and extra expense for food and laundry. School is not doing what they once did. With the mess that we are in, I thought the kids activities might quiet down, but they just become more complicated and busier.

If we had a testimony time this morning, I imagine one of you would prefer we do not talk about the craziness of everything at work. I heard one of you remark not too long ago that you were surprised you had not been put on furlough by now. Business has seen a forty percent decrease since April, and the reality is that each of us has less to do, so we just work harder and trying to appear that we are busy. Everyone is saying next year will be different, but some days, it is hard to believe anything will be much different.

I would love to make room in my life for family, for friends, for unexpected people who might be passing through town that I could help, but I am so busy that I do not have room for one more thing in my life...**"She wrapped him in swaddling cloths and placed him in the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.** Maybe there was no room, because the innkeeper was busy.

However, what if it was not busyness. What if Joseph and Mary did not stop at a 3 star motel or a Bed and Breakfast, but they were seeking lodging with extended family. What if the inn was nothing more than a mere guestroom in a relative's home?

Joseph uncle's last words as they departed Nazareth, "When you arrive in Bethlehem, it is going to be hectic and chaotic, but look up Cousin Dan. I have not spoken to him in a while, but he is family... and family always has room." "Are you sure you want to take Mary with you—that is not going to be an easy trip for her", but Joseph gave his uncle one look and the discussion did not go any further.

Yet, is it possible that Joseph and Mary found out that after a long trip from Galilee down to Judea, Cousin Dan and family were not waiting with well wishes and andie mints on the guest pillows... for they did not have any room. In a society that valued hospitality as a bedrock core virtue, it is a little odd that there would be no room for them in their home. However, maybe they had heard the rumors of Mary's premarital pregnancy and with two teenage daughters still living at the house, they did

not want to appear as if they were supporting what looked like immoral behavior. Maybe it had nothing to do with a baby on the way, but there had been a disagreement from generations past and the last person Cousin Dan was going to help was the relative of you know who. Sometimes, family feuds can lay dormant for years before things are brought to light.

About three years ago, I was visiting my great Aunt and her daughter. Before this encounter, I had always thought that my grandfather was a great patriarch in the family. A hard worker and someone who was well loved by all. However, my mom (who was my grandfather's favorite) had passed a few years earlier, and a ninety-seven year-old great-aunt's tongue had no problem speaking a different version of my family history. I heard a story of how my grandfather pried his way into my grandmother's well wishes hoping there was family money. According to the two of them that afternoon, he spent the rest of their marriage making poor choices, swindling away their resources, and driving my grandmother to a life of loneliness. When the 30 minute sermon was finished, and the conversation ended with the words, "I hate to tell you this Chris, but your grandfather was a sorry, sorry man," I was so grateful I had a place to stay that night and did not need a room. Could it be that there was no room for the birth of Jesus because of a family squabble? **She wrapped him in swaddling cloths and placed him in the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**

There is so much mystery around this innkeeper that the possibilities of what actually took place are endless. Maybe it was not busyness or a family squabble. Maybe there was no room for Jesus that night, because the Innkeeper was simply tired, and totally exhausted. It does not take much of an imagination to visualize this scenario taking place that night in Bethlehem.

The day had started at 6:30 that morning. There was feeding the guests who were departing while smiling and asking them to fill out the survey card of their visit. We all knew how many were on the books for the day ahead, and of course, like any other day, there is always that one family who thinks the check-out time does not apply to them. When the Ackerman's finally pulled out of the parking lot at 2:00 in the afternoon, the first guests for the day were already arriving. At 3:00, 2 of the housekeepers for the night time shift called in sick, there was a phone call that the firewood for the furnace was running low and we were not sure if there were enough eggs for breakfast in the morning.

From about five to eight in the evening, the streets outside the place were bustling. Nobody could find a place to tie up their donkeys. A double booked room mess up by one of the former employees and I, the innkeeper was just lucky that the room that quite hadn't been remodeled was available. I offered a 50% off discount to the room with unfinished paint and no mirrors on the wall. Everyone was happy.

Finally, everyone was checked in, and there was nobody coming to the lobby needing something. When the Cohen's finally arrived at 10:45 p.m.—all six of them, I was able to take off the hat of Innkeeper and retire to my room and just fall into the bed. Maybe five minutes passed and there was a knock on the door. I begged my Sarah to go get the door and tell them we do not have any room. However if you know my Sarah, once she saw that young teenage girl in labor, she was not going to let me rest until something was done. Turning over in bed, I told her: "We don't have any

rooms, but tell them the best we can do is allow them to stay out in the back in our little cave with the animals.” It would at least be warmer. Tell them “It’s on the house.” Sarah asked me, “Are you going to get up and help them?” No, I just gave them free lodging—I’m exhausted.

When I opened my eyes again, it was the morning. Sarah asked me if I wanted to know what happened that night. I told her that the Gellars were already complaining that there was something wrong with the coffee and I did not have time. As I was walking away, she said something about the baby being a boy and how unusual that a few shepherds wandered on our property to see all that was taking place. The last words I heard when as I left the room were: “I still can’t figure out how those shepherds knew a baby was being born in our barn.”... **She wrapped him in swaddling cloths and placed him in the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.**

There are several reasons the innkeeper might have acted like he did. Busyness, a family disagreement, just being worn out and tired, but what if the most logical truth is simply the most obvious. The Bible does not mention an innkeeper, because he was not there. Somewhere in all the craziness around him, the innkeeper decided to disengage, escape from reality, and take a break from the world.

There was a Roman census. First one in years. The Innkeeper knew the madness that was about to occur in his small town. He decided for him and the Mrs. to take that four day weekend they had been talking about for months. Three steps off the porch, he looked back at her and said, “Flip that sign to read “No Vacany” and let’s get out of dodge.”

In that sense, I wonder how many of us are innkeepers who fail to have room for Jesus, because we make a conscious (or unconscious) decision to unplug, disengage, and take a break from everything around us. The drama of life can be suffocating, pressing in on us to such a degree we figuratively or literally escape to the mountains (or in my case, the beach). The sickness in our world is at an all-time high—Covid, Cancer, the Common Cold. The news about the government does not leave any human soul in a happy place... and after two Quarantines, the loss of your dad this year, and the unpredictability of what shoe will fall next, it is easy to echo the possible words of this innkeeper: “Flip the Sign to “No Vacancy!” I don’t have room for one more thing or one more person in my life right now.

And as we approach Christmas, could it be that Christ is desiring to appear in our life during the most chaotic of times and circumstances, the most unruly situation many of us have ever seen, hoping to manifest His Spirit in a way that would bring salvation to the crisis of 2020, to any personal predicament ... and we have already made the decision that we have no more room.

I assume the church will speculate who the innkeeper was until the end of time. We just do not know. We only know that he (or she) will be forever known as the person who did not make room for Jesus. He will always be chastised for his missed opportunity to meet the Savior of the world, to hold the baby in his arms, to tell his grandchildren about the night “God in flesh” came to his establishment.

The innkeeper was not Herod. He did not order the killing of any babies. The innkeeper was not a tax collector who stole money from his own people. The innkeeper

was not a beggar on the streets, but a hard-working citizen of Bethlehem, a well-respected member of the community.

Maybe the church should be kinder to the innkeeper, let him off the hook... but we just can't let it go. He missed an opportunity of a lifetime, because he was not willing to make room for Jesus.

However if we could give the innkeeper a pass, maybe we will be let off the hook when we fail to recognize Christ in our midst. Life is busy, family dynamics are interesting, and exhaustion and needing a sabbatical are a reality. Maybe we can get a pass too... But I just can't today. I can't give you one. I can't give me one. Christmas is coming in 12 days and Jesus will be appearing. Christmas is coming... and maybe not in 12 days for you, but around three o'clock this afternoon. Jesus is arriving in your life as:

A Knock on the door

A phone call from a prodigal

An occasion to do ministry

A chance encounter that is not on your calendar.

An opportunity of a lifetime... Jesus is coming—will you make room for Him in your life?

She wrapped him in swaddling cloths and placed him in the manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.