

“How Does a Weary World Rejoice? We Make Room, Luke 2:1-20  
First Presbyterian Church of Salt Lake City  
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Rev. Jamie White

Friends, theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote that **“the celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who look forward to something greater to come.”** So, if you’re feeling troubled in soul, if you know yourself to be imperfect... well then, tonight, you’ll be right at home here at First Pres. In fact, all month long we’ve been asking this recurring question, ‘how does a weary world rejoice?’ We’ve just been naming reality for what it is. Many folks are weary. Weary when they consider all that is going wrong in this broken world, and weary when they think of all that still feels wrong in their own lives and families. We’re weary... but we’re also hopeful and expectant. We want to encounter God. We want things to be different. We dream of the world as it could be.

We just sang one of my all-time favorite carols, *Joy to the World*. It begins, **“Joy to the world, the Lord is come. Let Earth receive her King. Let every heart prepare Him room.”** Friends, how does a weary world rejoice? We prepare him room. God has broken into our world and continues to do so, but what is our part? We make room. We make room for Christ to be born anew in our own souls, in our families, in our community here, in our larger world. We make room for God... for this God has always done whatever it takes to make room for us.

Let’s turn to scripture and hear the familiar story of Christ’s birth from Luke 2:1-20 (NRSV) **“In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration that was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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. In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the 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!’ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So, they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all**

**who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying, and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.”** This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God.

Luke’s Gospel tells us that when Mary gives birth to Jesus, she lays him in a manger, for there was no room for them in the inn. Scholars have spilled a lot of ink arguing about where, exactly, this birth occurs. I mean, most of us probably imagine this (**SHOW PIC of Stable Scene**). Luke tells us that Jesus is laid in a manger, right? So, there must have been a stable or a barn. In fact, we’ve created a narrative that goes something like this: the young couple arrives in town right as Mary goes into labor. But because they had to travel more slowly than others, all the rooms are already taken. So, after Joseph and Mary are turned away by the innkeepers, they eventually happen upon a deserted barn and hunker down to have the baby. Now, some assume a bit of compassion from the local innkeeper, who seeing a woman in labor, at least feels badly that all the rooms are booked and offers the use of the inn’s stable as a last resort. But the reality of what happened is likely a lot different.

Scholars remind us that in this ancient culture, hospitality was deeply engrained; it still is in many parts of the world outside the U.S. So, the likelihood of someone turning away a pregnant woman, even if she’s a total stranger, is slim to none in a culture that prioritized hospitality. Even more, remember, Joseph is going back to his hometown, where he was born, to be registered. So, the folks in Bethlehem knew him. Even more, there is a very good chance that his parents and extended family still lived there. Additionally, the word we see translated from the Greek in that line “for there was no room for them in the inn” is the word *Kataluma*, which *can be* translated inn, but is better translated as guest room. There’s a different Greek word for a hotel or inn, but Luke does not use it here, and chooses instead the more fluid *kataluma*.

So, in all reality, here’s what probably happened. Joseph and Mary traveled to Bethlehem, a town that had a regular population of something like 500-1000 people. This is a really small village; many of us when to high school with more the double this many people. But just like most small towns, Bethlehem was the kind of place where the folks who were born there would eventually grow up and move to more populated, urban areas for school and work opportunities. But what that means is this... when this census is demanded, the population of Bethlehem swelled from 500-ish people to several thousand overnight as folks arrived to register. Joseph was likely knocking on his own family’s door with his very pregnant wife... but either way, all the guest room space had already been taken.

So, Mary and Joseph are given the only space left, the space that the animals usually inhabited. Now that could have been in an outside stable, but it’s much more likely to have been inside their home, on the bottom floor, where many families would have an area for animals to be brought inside and kept safe at night. I explain this to draw your attention to how many other people would likely have been around while Mary was in labor.

And not just any people either, Joseph's family and other relatives that had shown up in town needing a place to stay. And remember, we're told that Mary and Joseph are not quite married yet, they're engaged at this point. Can you imagine what it might have been like for Joseph to show up at an impromptu family reunion with a very pregnant fiancé? To get the arched brows and side-eye from his grandparents when he tried to explain what the angels had told him in a dream? Or think about Mary. I don't know about you, but this is not how I would want to meet my new in-laws for the first time. "Nice to meet you Aunt Sally, excuse me really quick while I have this next contraction." I'm sure we've all got stories about the awkwardness of meeting our in-laws for the first time. My in-laws are here tonight, and they could retell a few of our awkward stories for sure. But even still, I'm pretty sure Mary's story takes the cake here!

Friends, I explain all this, not to dash your image of the nativity, but to complicate the narrative of what happened the night Jesus was born. Was it in an abandoned stable or in the living room of Joseph's parents' house? Was Bethlehem teeming with too many visitors all arriving for the census? Was Joseph's family inhospitable because they disapproved of his marital situation? Regardless of where the birth occurs, what we know is that Christ is born in a crowded, unlikely place. And yet, God makes a place here anyway. **"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 room for them in the inn."**

Now what happens next—though absolutely absurd—probably really helped Mary and Joseph. Because all of a sudden, a group of random shepherds arrive stunned and slack jawed. They then try and explain to everyone that a choir of angels (!! ) just stopped them in the middle of their shift to tell them that the Messiah had been born. Even more, the angels told them to go and see it for themselves. And how would they know they were in the right place, that this was the right child? **"You will find the child lying in a manger."** He'll be the one sleeping in a feed trough. And sure enough, here is the Christ child, lying in a manger.

I bet Mary and Joseph really appreciated these humble visitors arriving to confirm to everyone else what they already knew to be true. And because because Mary is a way better person than I am, she didn't even turn to Joseph's family to say, "See, I tried to tell you!" No, we're told that **"Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart."** It was a lot to ponder too. This promised baby had been born, who was somehow just like every other baby Mary had seen; soft, fragile, and dependent of his new young mother. But then this baby was also somehow very different. He was somehow God in the flesh, born of Spirit to redeem the whole world. This baby arrives in un-ideal circumstances, in a crowded town, all the rooms taken... but he also arrives to heavenly stars shining brightly and choirs of angels promising that from now on everything would be different. And Mary and Joseph, they made room for this mystery, they made room for Christ to be born. The question for us tonight, in our own time, is this, will we make room our lives?

There is a famously told Christmas story about a little boy who really wanted to be Joseph in the Church Christmas pageant. He didn't get the part of Joseph but did end up landing the part of the

innkeeper. But he was disappointed. The night of the performance though, he decided to change the story. So, on stage that night, as little Mary and Joseph approached and asked for a room, the audience fully expected our innkeeper to say, “There is no room in the inn.” However, this little boy changed the story that night. When Joseph and Mary asked for a place to have their baby, he burst out and said, “Sure, I happen to have the very best room in the inn. You can have mine.” This of course, caused the audience to burst out laughing and ended up changing the whole pageant. When his parents got him home later that night, they asked him why he changed the story. He explained that the first innkeeper obviously didn’t make the right choice... maybe he didn’t know any better. But this little boy said he knew better. So, he chose to do better and wrote a better story. If he was playing the innkeeper, he was going to give them his own room.

As is often the case, the kids get it right, don’t they? On the other side of history, we read Luke 2 tonight, and we know better too. The Messiah has come. Jesus Christ came to bring life and life to the fullest, to forgive our sins, to show us what God is really like, and to ultimately redeem the whole world through his birth, life, death, and resurrection. And so, like this little innkeeper, we know what really happened that night.

It was us that had estranged ourselves from God, it was humanity that shut the door on love, claiming there was no room. But God simply refused to leave us that way. Authors Dustin Willis and Brandon Clements write, **“If ever there has been a stranger in need, someone completely excluded and hopeless, fully dependent on the grace of another—that is us. We were out in the cold, victims of our own folly, freezing to death from the coldness in our own hearts. And all throughout history, God opens the door, rescues us, and welcomes us back into relationship through sheer, inexplicable grace.”** -Dustin Willis and Brandon Clements, “The Simplest way to Change the World”

Christ is born so that we might recognize that there is always room for us, that there is nothing that can separate us from the love of God. And then, we are invited to respond to God’s glorious embrace, by making room for others... who are knocking on the door and just hoping that there might be enough room for them too. Our faith comes down to two things friends, we are called to love God and love one another. That’s it... but that’s enough. What might it look like for you to make more room for God in your life by opening the door and loving others? Will we be the innkeepers that know better, who swing the door wide open to those in need, and say “here, you can have my room.”

The birth of Christ is not just a one-time event that took place a really long time ago in a lonely stable. No, it is a birth that happens throughout our lives as God continues to become incarnate in us. As God continues to put on flesh, in you and in me. As the beloved theologian and mystic, Thomas Merton once said:

**Christ is born in us today  
In order that he may appear  
To the whole world through us.**

After this Christ child grows up, he will go on to say: **“I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.’ But they will ask, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?’... ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’” -Matt 25**

When Dennis’ father immigrated from Europe in the 1930’s things were bad. WWI had ravaged Europe and the Great Depression had just hit the United States. His parents sent him over all alone as a young man, to get an education and buy some land for a family farm. The family was desperate, and they hung all their hopes on sending their young son to try and make a new life here. Dennis’ dad never wanted to be a farmer, but it was all he could do to survive. So, he went to school and he worked a small piece of land for several years, all alone. He missed his home terribly, but he couldn’t afford to visit. When the holidays came his first year, he was desperately sad. He missed his family, their traditions, meals, and the small gifts they used to exchange. It nearly broke him to be alone that Christmas. The next year was just as bad. He longed to be invited to dinner somewhere, to spend time with his neighbors, to be included in their holiday traditions, but no one invited him and so he was alone again. The following year, it was just the same. Dennis’ father was so lonely and so depressed; he couldn’t take much more. One day, he took some of his savings and walked to a store and bought himself a red necktie to try and cheer himself up. He had it gift wrapped and brought it home and when Christmas day came, while he was alone and missing his family, he opened the gift he had bought himself, put on the red necktie just wept.

Dennis’ father finally did save up enough money to visit home and see his family. What a homecoming it was. He was able to share the money he had been earning, he got to prepare food with his mother and read with his father. It filled his heart to be back home for this visit. While he was there, he was reunited with a young woman who had been his friend in grade school before he left for America. They quickly fell in love and in the whirlwind romance of his short visit, he put it all on the line and asked her to marry him. The only issue was that she had to decide in a matter of days if she was willing to not only get married but to get on that ship with him. And so, they met together to talk through the difficult realities of this proposal. All the normal questions surfaced, and she wanted to know; “Where will we live? Will I be able to finish my education? Are we going to have kids right away? Does this mean I need to be a farmer too? Will we be able to travel home to visit?”

Dennis’ father on the other hand only wondered one thing. He turned to his bride to be and said, “I am happy to live anywhere and work any job. I am happy to try and visit our families as often as we can. I don’t care how many kids we have or when we have them. I want you to have the

freedom to study anything you want and create whatever kind of life you can imagine. But there is one thing is non-negotiable for me. When the holidays come, we must open our doors to anyone and everyone who is feeling alone. The only thing that matters to me is that we make room at our table for others. I don't want another soul to ever feel like I have.

Dennis will tell you that as he grew up, his father really meant that. Their family table was always full of the most random people: neighbors, guests, stragglers and strangers. He can't remember a single holiday with just their family because his dad made sure no one was alone. He made room.

This Christmas, may we make room for however God might arrive. Because like the shepherds were told, you might find even the Messiah lying in manger, for goodness' sake. You just never know how God might show up. May we refuse to stick to the same old innkeeper script, that says "there's no room for you here", and instead, change the story, and welcome in all who are desperate for a place at our table. May we be a people that makes room. Amen.