

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd, Reno, NV

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Date: December 24, 2023, Christmas Eve, using resources from *A Sanctified Art*

Text: Luke 2:1-20

Title: We Make Room (Sanctified Art sub-theme)

Focus: Christ's birth is a story about God making room in unlikely places and circumstances. God in Jesus made room or offered hospitality and grace for us. In joy, we are called to extend that same sense of hospitality and welcome to others, recognizing that Jesus, throughout his life and ministry, welcomed the outsider.

Gospel Reading: Luke 2:1-20

¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph 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. ⁵He 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.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, 'Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah,* the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.' ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host,* praising God and saying,

¹⁴ 'Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!'

¹⁵ 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.' ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

What Do We Know about the Story of Jesus' Birth?

Luke begins to tell the story of the birth of Jesus. He is a storyteller with an eye for detail.

- “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria” (Luke 2:1-2)
 - He places the birth of Jesus in a particular historical time, in a particular socio-political context.
- “All went to their own towns to be registered” (v. 3).
 - Jesus’ birth occurs in a particular cultural and geographic setting.
- “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. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child” (v. 4).
 - Luke describes particular people and their role in the birth of Jesus.

Luke is fairly detailed about a number of things—the regional political leadership, governmental decisions affecting residents of the region, the lineage of Joseph, the relationship between Joseph and Mary, that she was pregnant, and that they had to travel to respond to the decree.

He does not provide information (or *much* information) about other things about which we may be curious. Without that detail, our imagination often fills in the blanks.

- How did they get from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem in Judea? *PAUSE*
 - Well, a donkey, of course!

Our imaginations may fill that in, but there is no mention of that in the text. But in our heads or in pictures on Christmas cards and banners or cast in Christmas plays, we see Mary seated on a donkey and Joseph walking alongside.

Or, if you read about the time around Jesus’ birth in the Gospel of Matthew, Matthew describes that,

“ . . . after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, ²asking, ‘Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising, and have come to pay him homage’” (Matthew 2:1b-2).

- How many wise men were there?
 - Well, three of course! *Gesture to our banner.*

However firmly that number may be implanted in our head, the Bible doesn’t actually say. We have the number three in our heads because scripture *does* say that the wise men recognized this special birth and wished to pay homage and brought gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. With three distinct gifts, and perhaps influenced by the

traditional hymn, *We Three Kings*, we have three Kings in our heads, though scripture doesn't say.

Luke continues, 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.

- Were Mary and Joseph rejected and turned aside when they came to Bethlehem?
- Was there an innkeeper in this story?
 - We see one in almost every Christmas play.
- What about a stable full of barnyard animals?
 - Don't we all have one in the nativity scene on our fireplace mantle or nearby table?

Some of this detail and the way our imaginations fill in the blanks may not matter much one way or the other. Does it matter that there were three kings or five or ten? It wouldn't seem to. It matters more that they recognized this distinct birth and that they came to pay him homage. They picked up on the tension or threat perceived by King Herod.

- What do we know about the birth of Jesus and are there differences of views? Why does it matter? Where is the good news for us in this story?

Differences of Views

There are differences of views about exactly where the birth of Jesus occurs. Here is an explanation I find persuasive.

New Testament scholar and theology professor Kenneth Bailey was born in Bloomington, Illinois. He earned degrees in Arabic and literature, in theology, and in New Testament studies and then spent 40 years teaching in the Middle East--in Egypt, Lebanon, and Cyprus. His educational focus, first in his own studies and then as a professor himself, his birth and formative years in the United States, and then 40 years of living in the Middle East gave him a unique ability to bridge the cultural gaps between our North American contemporary context and the Middle Eastern context of scripture.

He basically says that because we don't understand the Middle Eastern cultural context, we insert details and import assumptions from our Western tradition that do not necessarily fit the Middle Eastern world as a real story about real people in a real village.¹

¹ Kenneth Bailey, "The Manger and the Inn: A Middle Eastern View of the Birth story of Jesus." Published Dec. 21, 2006, and updated November 27, 2023 in *Presbyterian Outlook*.

We receive the English translation, “there was no place for them in the *inn*,” (v. 7b), but Kenneth Bailey says this is an unfortunate translation of the word translated as *inn* that contributes to our misunderstanding of the setting and of how Mary and Joseph and Jesus were received. Our assumptions lead us to blame an unmentioned innkeeper or the hardheartedness of others in Bethlehem.

The explanation is a little complicated, but I’ll try to be clear:

- He makes a compelling case that the word translated *inn* is better translated as *guest room*.
- So, what’s being described is not a commercial establishment, but an extension of a simple peasant home.
- Luke knew the common word for a commercial inn and used it in that story of the Good Samaritan. But he uses a different word here in Luke 2 (Greek *kataluma*). He uses a different word intentionally because he means something different.
- Which means that the better translation of the phrase here would be “no room for them in the *guest room*.”

What about the House and Rooms?

Ken Bailey additionally explains that traditional one-room homes in this region were split-level with a small lower level for animals at one end. The animals would be brought in at night and let out during the day. These one-room homes often would have had a guest room attached to the end. The “manger” would have been built into the floor of the upper level on which the family lives. If a cow or donkey were hungry at night, it could stand and reach the feed on the floor of the upper-level family living space.

A description that is complicated to us who are unfamiliar with this typical architecture would have been easily and fully understood by the Palestinian reader for whom it was originally written. They would have known that mangers are in the living room and guest rooms are often attached to one-homes and are used only for guests.

So, here’s how the sequence would have been understood:

- “And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in bands of cloths and laid him in a *manger*.”
 - The reader would have *instinctively* asked, “Manger? Oh. They are in the main family room! Why not the guest room?”
- The author would have instinctively anticipated the above question and so provides a response, “Because there was no place for them in the guest room [*kataluma*].”

- The reader would conclude, “Ah, I see. So, the guest room was full. Never mind; the family room is more appropriate, anyway.”

Joseph finds shelter in a simple, peasant home. The home has a guest room, but it is already full. Since it is full, there is “no room,” but the host *makes* room. He clears the one-room family living space and offers it to the holy family.

The child is born and is placed in the *manger*, a depression in the floor, to keep him from harm. Jesus is born in a simple, peasant home as any other village boy.

Why Does this Detail Matter? What’s the Good News?

- The Bible doesn’t specifically say that Mary rode to Bethlehem on a donkey. It’s a detail that Luke didn’t choose to include. It seems to be a reasonable assumption and it probably doesn’t matter one way or the other.

Other aspects of the story have greater theological impact in terms of how we understand the meaning of the birth of Jesus:

- Jesus was likely born in an ordinary way in a simple, peasant home.
- Because of the census, Bethlehem, a village with perhaps 2000-3000 people usually living there, would have been a busy, crowded place.
- Because Mary and Joseph had extended family there, Joseph would have been able to arrange a place for his family to stay, even though it was crowded. There is no mean innkeeper. There is no hardheartedness attributed to Bethlehem.
- In this particular peasant home, because of the census, there would likely have been many people already in the guest room. Hospitality was very important in Middle Eastern culture. It wasn’t that Jesus was rejected here, but “there was no room in the guest room” because it was already being occupied.

So, when Mary laid him in a manger, it was in the main family room rather than in the guest room. They made room for him. It was full or crowded, but they made room.

The Good News is that in the coming of Jesus, **God made room for us.**

In the announcement of Jesus’ birth, the angel proclaimed this was “. . . good news of great joy for all the people” (Luke 2:10).

This proclamation was made, first of all, to shepherds, who were outcasts from their society. They were the first to discover that this Messiah comes welcoming those on the outside or the margins.

“Making room” was what Jesus did his whole life. He made room for

- The woman at the well (John 4)
- Children who were overlooked (Matthew 19:14, Mark 10:14. Luke 18:16)
- Sinners and tax collectors (See Zacchaeus, for instance, in Luke 19)

- A ragtag bunch of disciples, both “the 12” along with other followers, who included ordinary folks like fishermen and women.
- He broke rules about healing on the Sabbath to make room for those who were sick and declared unclean and outcast (See, for instance, the man with the withered hand in Luke 6:6-11).

Jesus always creating room for the outsider.

The gospel of John tells the story of Jesus washing the disciples’ feet, which was the job of a servant. When they protested, he explained,

“So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another’s feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (John 13:14-15).

In a crowded town, overstuffed by the census, people made room.

- In a house that was already full, they made room for Mary and Joseph and baby Jesus.
- In a crowded world, God makes room for us.
- In a world in which people grab for power and status, Jesus takes on the role of a servant who offers himself in self-giving love and invites us to do the same.

Thanks be to God for making room for us. May we follow in the way of Jesus and make room for others. Amen.

Here is detail about the translation choice Ken Bailey addresses:

One of the most familiar stories in the gospel of Luke is the parable of the Good Samaritan. When Luke tells the story of the Good Samaritan, the Samaritan takes the wounded man is taken to a commercial setting that provides shelter for strangers (See Luke 10:34). He gives coins to the innkeeper for the man’s care. That Greek word for *inn* is

Original Word: πανδοχεῖον English: pandochēion (pan-dokk-i'-on)

Definition: an inn

Greek *kataluma* (In Luke 2:7): The only other time Luke uses this word, he also defines it, so that it is totally clear what he means. The only other case of the use of *kataluma* in Luke’s Gospel is in 22:11, where the disciples are told to follow a man carrying a jar of water and on arrival at his house to ask: “Where is the *kataluma* [RSV: guest room], where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?” And he will show you a large upper room [*anagalon*] furnished.”

So, in the context of this verse, *kataluma* is clearly defined — it means a guest room attached to a private home. So, Luke indicates a commercial inn with the word *pandokheion* and a private guest room as a *kataluma*.