

## Making Room For God

### 5 – Re-Establishing Trust

Isaiah 9:2-7

Titus 2:11-14

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2010

Christmas Eve

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Tonight candles are lit, carols are sung, families are reunited, friends are gathered, here and all over the world. The gifts have been bought, or better made. Our holiday tables are overflowing. The stores have shut early, for the first time in a month, and it grows eerily quiet out on the highways. The story is being recounted again in virtually every known language, the astonishing news of God's entrance into this old world floating, spinning, traveling through this galaxy, within this universe, this universe within some vast multiverse of countless stars – a gift is given, "Do not be afraid; for behold I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord."<sup>i</sup>

The tender scene has been commemorated in the beloved Creche, an idea begun, about half way back to this event itself, in 1223 by St. Francis who had the first life size manger scene constructed for townsfolk of Assisi to help them grasp the mystery. The scene stuck and has been created again and again in small simple figures and life-size elaborate figures, as well as in the living scenes, like the one here tonight at 5:00, Mary, Joseph, the Shepherds, the animals, the Wise Men. I got to be Joseph in the first grade pageant when I was six years old! Tonight all over the world people are making room for the Savior. Will you make room for him? Will you give him a place to lay his head and to live his life? Not only tonight but always?

### I

It was not like this that first Christmas. Then it was just another dark cold night like any other in that oppressed out-of-the-way land of Judea. Caesar was on his throne. Herod had the province under tight control. Religious leaders knew their place and kept to them. Uprisings of any sort- political or religious simply were not tolerated. At the command of the all-powerful Emperor to go and be counted, a census so more taxes could be collected, a young couple, she in the last stages of pregnancy, make their way through the darkness traveling on a hard journey some 80 miles down from their home in Nazareth to the husband's ancestral home in Bethlehem, "because he was of the house and lineage of David." Joseph the carpenter was a descendent of the great King, unrecognized as such that night.

Peter Bruegel painted the scene, in his own culture in his 1566 masterpiece "The Numbering at Bethlehem." He sets the scene in a colorful Flemish village,

“dominated by the cold glow of a winter sun, the jagged outline of a steppabled house, children skating and throwing snowballs at one another. Two great wheeled casks of wine are drawn up before the inn where the registration takes place, a pig is being butchered for a feast (a tip-off that this is not a Jewish scene), and chickens peck vainly at the snow. Hidden in the picture, almost lost, barely discernible in the foreground, just right of center, is a bent-over man carrying a carpenter’s saw and leading a mule that carries a hooded and blanketed woman. Only when it is pointed out do you notice them, do you see them, for they are hidden in the picture.”<sup>ii</sup>

Not noticed in the painting. Not welcomed in the inn. No room. Sorry all full. But for, as the tradition tells it, a kindly innkeeper who offers them space out back, the couple would have been left out in the cold. As it is that night the Son of God is born amid cow dung, donkey droppings, sheep and straw. When this child was born there was no delivery room, no bells ringing, no townsfolk or distant relatives coming by to celebrate their newest arrival. No notice in Bethlehem of this. No dancing or singing in the streets. No room.

## II

Yet God himself provided music that night, and light and witnesses. God found his way in. God made himself Room, as he had done before with his people, a way where there was no way. At just the right moment, what Paul the Apostle calls “the fullness of time”, God sends us his greatest gift. And who is given word first? No name, no-count, uneducated shepherds. To them an angel of the Lord appeared. “Do not be afraid. Good news of great joy – a Savior is born who is Christ the Lord!”

They still wander those fields and graze their sheep around Bethlehem today. Shepherds still don’t really count in the society. They don’t go to school, don’t vote, don’t pay taxes, are neither Jew nor Palestinian. Just shepherds. It was an unlikely young shepherd boy who, in 1946, threw a rock into an old cave, heard a clay jar shatter, went in to see, and found the Dead Sea Scrolls. God then and now has a knack for revealing hidden things to the world’s least likely witnesses, shepherds.

Gayle and I had a wonderful moment last spring after leading a group through the Holy Land when with our Palestinian Christian guide from Bethlehem we drove out from there into those stark Judean Shepherds Fields. Traveling up and down those hills, we stopped at one particular spot to get a view off in the distance toward the Jordan river, when, looking down into the valley in front of us we saw a single shepherd leading his flock of sheep. “Listen,” Gayle said. We listened, and we heard music. The shepherd was playing his pipe for his sheep, leading them to fresh pasture. That night when the angels sang, God added his own glorious music to theirs, “Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace.”

To such as these, the least and the lowliest, as well as exotic kings from the East, wisdom seekers, who followed other religions, powerful leaders, low and high, all, God sent the startling news. The Savior is born. And they came running with haste from the fields, from the East, into Bethlehem to see what God had done. There in that animal

stall they gazed upon God's great gift, God making his home among us in a little baby. Emmanuel, God with us. God Incarnate. "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."<sup>iii</sup>

One person has said,

Reduced to its most basic, what the incarnation means is the Word that is God, has made its home in one human life, born of Mary in the City of David. Home is about the willingness of God to come find us where we are."<sup>iv</sup>

Early in our ministry when we were serving a church in Tulsa, OK, before our children were born, before gray hair, a family with two elementary age children asked Gayle and me to baby sit for a few weeks while the parents went to China. We agreed. This family happened to sit way back in the balcony of that large sanctuary. One Sunday, shortly before we were to come and stay with the children, Bill, the father, leaned over and told his young son Matt, pointing at me sitting far below on the chancel in my minister's robe, "You see that man down there? He is going to come and stay with you and your sister." Matt got a terrified look on his face, "You mean God is coming to stay at our house?"

At Christmas God takes off his royal robe, comes down from heaven to earth, and stays at our house. God comes from highest heaven to the least and the lowliest house, as well as the finest mansion or palace, comes where ever we are to make his home with us. Will we welcome him? Will we offer him room? "Let every heart prepare him room," we sing. Will we offer Jesus Christ the Savior, the Lord a place to live, to dwell within us? As Barbara Brown Taylor has put it,

Because we cannot find our way there, (that is back to God), the place comes to us, and it turns out not to be a place at all. It turns out to be a person. Emmanuel, the one who came to be with us forever."<sup>v</sup>

He came to make his home within us, to change things inwardly and then outwardly forever. John writes in his Gospel prologue:

"To all who received him, who believed in his name he gave power to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God."<sup>vi</sup>

Jesus, the Son of Mary, the Son of God, came to make his home among us. And he promised us a home, room and a place with him forever. "In my Father's house are many rooms. I go to prepare a place for you," he said. As Paul announces, "The grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation to all. He it is who gave himself for us that he might redeem us from all iniquity."<sup>vii</sup> At Christmas a light began to shine out in the darkness, and the darkness then and the darkness now has never been able to put out that light. So we sing, and light our candles, and repent of our sins, and place our faith for all

time and eternity in this promised child. Tonight, tomorrow, and all the days and years thereafter he made room for you. Will you make room for him?

“Be near me, Lord Jesus; I ask Thee to stay  
Close by me forever and love me, I pray,  
Bless all the dear children in Thy tender care,  
And fit us for heaven to live with Thee there.”<sup>viii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> Luke 2:10-11.

<sup>ii</sup> The World of Bruegel, Time-Life Books, 1968, pp. 102-3

<sup>iii</sup> John 1:14.

<sup>iv</sup> John Buchanan, “Home” Preached at 4<sup>th</sup> Presbyterian Church, Dec. 2008.

<sup>v</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, “None of Us Is Home Yet,” The Preaching Life, p.158.

<sup>vi</sup> John 1:11-13.

<sup>vii</sup> Titus 1:11, 14.

<sup>viii</sup> “Away in a Manger”, The Presbyterian Hymnal, p. 24.