



December 24, 2017  
Rev. Mark Toone  
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

## *Inviting God: The Innkeeper* Luke 2:1-7

Last summer Cyndi and I bought a 1967 fixer-upper in the Harbor that hadn't been touched since it was built, including the original avocado green carpet. We haven't moved in yet because we are still remodeling. The other day, I went over early to check on the progress. I walked up to the front door...and found it standing wide open. It wasn't just unlocked. It wasn't just ajar. It was *wide* open. Our entire neighborhood was a little warmer than the rest of the city because I paid to heat it all night. And it was a *little* freaky walking into a dark house with few working lights wondering who or what had wandered in to my very empty, very open, *very* welcoming new residence.

Even if you come from a not-very-churchy background, I'll bet you know that when Joseph and his pregnant wife, Mary, showed up in Bethlehem, they didn't exactly throw open the doors for them, did they? Listen again to these few verses from Luke:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Every Christmas Eve folks join us who wouldn't necessarily describe themselves as religious. You might be here just because you want to support your family in a wonderful annual tradition. And if that describes you, in a moment I'm going to ask you to stand up, one by one, and explain yourself to the rest of us! No...I'm not going to do that. No matter *why* you are here or how often you come, you are so welcome. And who knows what God might stir in your heart this evening...if you'll give him a chance!

But if you were one of those who was hearing this story for the first time, it might stir up a lot of questions. Why would Joseph take a very-pregnant Mary on a road trip? Why to Bethlehem? And why didn't they book a room on AirBNB before showing up?

The "registration" Luke describes was for the purposes of taxation. It was the Roman way of ensuring that they had a complete list of every possible taxpayer in the empire. In order to do that, you were required to return to the city of your ancestors. Which means that Joseph had to leave his village of Nazareth and walk more than 90 miles with his betrothed, Mary. And when they arrived, it was like showing up for the biggest family reunion you've ever attended.

My family is small. I have no aunts, no uncles, no cousins. We could hold a Toone family reunion in a phone booth. How many of you can relate to that? How many know what a phone booth is? But my wife Cyndi comes from a Mormon family. Her family reunions were so big they had to trade off: the Nielsens one year, the Henriens the next. And these family gatherings were a shock to my system...*huge* and *busy* and *crazy*. How many here can relate to *that*? After 23 years of marriage, I thought I'd seen it all, reunion-wise. Then we got invited to a reunion of *another* branch of her Mormon family... the polygamist family reunion. *Now*...how many can relate to that? I didn't think so!

When Mary and Joseph showed up in Bethlehem to be registered, it was a *huge* family reunion. The place was packed out. We are told that there was "no place in the inn." Bethlehem was small; it's likely that there was only one inn. Some scholars even think that the word doesn't mean "inn;" it means "guest house." Whatever, when they arrived on the scene, every room...every bed was taken.

For the last year and a half, Cyndi and I have rented from dear friends a 900 square foot, one-bedroom flat above a machine shop. The setting is a little unusual. Our landlord runs the industrial heater hanging from the shop ceiling so that the heat will radiate up to our floor. It's very cozy. And best of all, I have had the run of the shop...the tools, the equipment, the grease pit... I've had a blast! It even has a wonderful oily smell and when I walk into that shop and smell that smell, I feel right at home. We love our little flat.

But there is one teensy drawback. We don't have an extra bedroom for when our kids visit. In fact, here is a picture of Cooper in his "bedroom." It's a closet...literally, a closet. So...if we had family members show up for a big reunion needing a room for the night, there would be one choice. Guess where? The machine shop downstairs. We could put an air mattress down there between the metal lathe and the arc welder. It would be a little smelly, a little uncomfortable, but it would be warm and safe!

That's what happened with Mary and Joseph. Middle Eastern culture is *very* hospitable. They would never turn anyone away...especially a young pregnant girl. But the only space left was the room where they kept their animals. And this part might shock you...the animals often lived in the same building as the family! Houses were sometimes built on top of small caves and the lower grotto was where the animals were kept. Here's a picture of it. The stable is in the lower cave area. And the second floor is where the family lived, ate and slept.

This arrangement had some advantages. For instance, the animals heated up the house. This was *their* version of our industrial shop heater downstairs! Of course, there was a *disadvantage* to storing your cows and sheep and donkeys downstairs. What? Yes...the smell! But, they got used to it. That's how many first-century Jewish families lived. In fact, I've actually visited an ancient house just like this one in the city of Nablus.

So...whether this was a real inn...or a guest house...the innkeeper...(what was his name? Fred.)...Fred was facing a dilemma. Every bed was filled. The best he could do was prepare a bed of straw for them between the cow and the sheep. And it was *there*...in that warm but

stinky basement...that Mary gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him tightly in swaddling cloths...they filled a feed trough with fresh hay... and there they laid the savior of the world, Jesus.

The Bible calls Jesus by another name, too: "Immanuel" which means "God with us." And we Christians take that literally. We really believe that in that moment in time...2000 years ago...in that place in time...a stable in Bethlehem... God left eternity, took on human form, and came a-callin'. You may not believe that. That's ok. But would you play along with me for just a moment? If that is true...if in the birth of Jesus, we witness God coming to earth to visit us...think about what this means!

First, it means that whatever modest corner of your life you are willing to offer Jesus, he will take it! We don't often think of God as being humble. After all, he is *God!* The Creator of all things. "Humble" and "God" don't seem to go together. And yet, how else can you describe a God who was willing to take on human form...a baby no less...and make his entrance into human history in a warm, stinky stable belonging to an innkeeper who has nothing better to offer.

Although... he *could* have offered better. He *could* have evicted the party staying in the Honeymoon Suite at the Bethlehem Inn. Or...he and *his* wife could have slept on the air mattress in the stinky stable and given Mary and Joseph *their* bed. Fred wasn't willing to give them a room. But he was willing to make a little room. And astoundingly, that was enough. The innkeeper offered a barn, and God took him up on it!

This is a very important message for many gathered here tonight who don't necessarily consider themselves Christians. In part, that might be because you've heard that in order to follow Jesus, you have to give him your whole life. And you're not willing to do that yet. You don't know him well enough. You don't trust him enough. And honestly, you LIKE being in control of your life (although if you were really honest, you'd admit that you don't always do a very good job of that!)

But what we learn from the innkeeper is, if you are willing to offer God even a small part of your life... you might be astounded to discover that He will take it...and begin his relationship with you under very modest terms!

If you knew that...if you knew that you could offer a small, humble corner of your life as a starting point...a taste test...to see if Jesus can be trusted... to see if there might be more to this life than you are presently experiencing... would you be willing to give it a try? Maybe not yet ready to give up your whole life...maybe not yet ready to turn over the master suite to the guest. But how about a closet? How about the shop? Or a stable?

You are here tonight! That's a start. Good for you. Here are a couple of other possibilities. What if you came back next week? One more time. Instead of waiting 'til Easter or next Christmas, how about next Saturday or Sunday? We love our weekly family reunions. Come twice in a row! And by the way, if you do, I have a very big surprise for you. Or how about this? Come to ONE free dinner at Alpha starting in January. You will never find a more user-friendly,

less judgmental, more welcoming environment in which to bring your doubts and suspicions about religion. Would the shot at having a real relationship with God be worth ONE good meal with some warm and welcoming guests? One dinner! Would that kill you? It might give you life!

Fred teaches us that our God is willing to accept your invitation into even the most modest corner of your life. But don't be surprised when God meets you in the dirtier, stinkier parts of your life...if he begins to transform them. That's what he does! That modest cave that housed the innkeeper's animals...that is now one of the most sacred places in the world. One of the oldest churches in the Holy Land, the Church of the Nativity, built in the year 565, sits atop cave where Jesus was born. Just a humble grotto basement for animals...but BECAUSE the innkeeper offered it to Jesus, God transformed this lowly cave into sacred space.

But it's amazing how reluctant we can be to invite Jesus into the dirtiest, stinkiest parts of our lives. I was at a party the other night and a woman who knew I was a pastor stood with me afterwards and shared how she WANTED to be a better follower of Jesus but that she was just not worthy. There were too many things in her life that were shameful to her. And right there, surrounded by the scurry of departing guests, I told her that what she was describing wasn't Christianity; it was American religion. American religion says that you work hard to be good and then God will love you...maybe. Christianity says that God already loves you even in your broken, dirty, stinky state, and that he sent Jesus on a rescue mission to save you! It's called grace. We don't earn it. We don't deserve it. But because our humble God loves you, he comes into the dirtiest places you are willing to open up to him...and transforms them. Cleans them up!

You may find this hard to believe. You may think that YOUR stall is TOO dirty...TOO stinky...to invite God in. But you're wrong. And if you would take one small step...one small risk... one tiny prayer...if you would open up one little corner of your life, like the innkeeper...you might be astounded to see how Jesus turns the stinky places of your life into holy ground.

Give it a try...what do you have to lose?