

December 17, 2023

God's Good News Story

The Birth of Jesus: The Innkeeper's Story

Today we continue with **God's Good News Story: The Christmas Chapters**. We've talked about the Emotions of Christmas, Mary & Joseph and today we get the story on the Innkeeper. Let's see what the Bible says-

Luke 2:1-7... *Now in those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus, that a census be taken of all the inhabited earth. ² This was the first census taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all the people were on their way to register for the census, each to his own city. ⁴ Now Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the city of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and family of David, ⁵ in order to register along with Mary, who was betrothed to him, and was pregnant. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*

This is all that is said about an Inn in this story. As you can see, there is actually nothing said about an 'Innkeeper'. But it is logical to deduce "**if there was no room in the inn**" obviously someone (an Innkeeper) had to tell them!

The stories that have arisen about the Innkeeper therefore are pretty much supposition, or based on logical deduction from historical data of the period, or else just simply someone's opinion on the subject. We may not know all the details, but from logical and historical, and spiritual deduction we can come up with some solid lessons and thoughts to learn from this part of **God's Good News Story**.

But 1st let's listen to a touching rendition of this encounter from a boy named Wally.

<https://artofthechristianninja.com/2013/12/20/making-room-for-jesus-redeeming-the-innkeeper/>

"Wally was big for his age—seven years old. He was very friendly, very excitable and everyone liked him – but he was a slow learner. Wally's family had only been coming to the church since summer, but now that the annual Christmas play was coming, everyone wondered what role the teacher would give *him*. He was on pins and needles as the teacher announced the roll. The rest of the Sunday School thought, "He's too big to be a sheep because they give that roll to the little kids. Perhaps he could pull the curtain or light the lights."

The director went down the list. Tommy would play Joseph. Clark, Jenny and Peter would be the Heavenly host. Mary would, of course, be Mary. And then, to everyone's surprise the teacher gave Wally the role of the innkeeper. The boy of course was delighted. He even had a speaking part. All he had to learn was one line: "There is no room in the inn." He practiced it every day before

the big night. Even on the way to school he would repeat, “There is no room in the inn. There is no room in the inn.”

Then came the night of the program. The parents took their places. Every seat was filled. The children entered singing “Oh come all ye faithful.” The lights dimmed. A hush moved over the audience. The curtain opened. Mary and Joseph entered the stage and walked up to the large wooden door that was to represent the inn. They knocked on the door and Wally came out, dressed as the most perfect innkeeper you have ever seen.

In a loud, confident voice, Joseph looked at Wally and said, “Please sir, my wife is not well. Could we have a room for the night?”

Wally was ready for his line. He had rehearsed it all day long. He began loudly, “there is...” and he hesitated. He started over again a little quieter. “There is...” and again his mind went completely blank. His cheeks flushed red. His heart began to pound. Sweat began to form on his brow. Everyone in the auditorium was absolutely silent, feeling a little embarrassed for poor Wally who just didn’t know what to do.

After a moment, Joseph thought he would improvise and started walking away toward where the stable was set up on stage left. Wally looked at Joseph and seeing him walking away, in desperation called out: “Hey, there’s no room in the inn... but there’s lots of room *at my house*, so why don’t you just come on home with me!”

Redeeming The Innkeeper

Isn’t that a nice little twist on the familiar story, isn’t it? Over the years the characters in the Christmas story have become very clearly defined for most of us who hear it every year. King Herod is a villain, the wise men and the shepherds are heroes. But the Innkeeper—well, how do you see the Innkeeper? When you read the story, and after watching years and years of Christmas plays and movies, what image comes to mind when I say, “There was no room for them in the inn?”

Perhaps, in our minds eye, we envision a crotchety, old man – like Mr. Scrooge, or Mr. Potter, or the Grinch – on his head is a nightcap, he wipes the sleep from his eyes, he stick his head out of his second story window grumbles: “There’s no room! Go sleep in the barn and leave me alone!”

The Bible doesn’t mention an innkeeper, but let’s assume there was. An “inn” in that day was more like a fortified campground with walls, towers, traders selling wares, and protection from marauders and thieves. Weary travellers could go there with their animals and know that, at least for one night, they would have water and be safe. There was a lot going on this night, and the place was packed beyond capacity. There was likely someone in charge of this resting spot.

And I think this poor man, this innkeeper, has gotten a bad rap. I want to redeem our poor innkeeper tonight. Consider that on that crazy, busy night in Bethlehem,

when the entire Roman world was astir, and everyone was clambering for a place to stay. Was it his fault that there were twelve rooms instead of thirteen? Was it his fault that Caesar Augustus had issued a decree that the entire world should be taxed, and that they would all come banging on his door? Was it his fault that Mary and Joseph were so late in arriving? If they would have come a couple days earlier... then maybe he would have had a room and he could have been a hero too! Hospitality was a serious responsibility and was expected in the Near East. It would have been very difficult for this man to turn away a very tired man and his young, frazzled, uncomfortable, very-pregnant wife.

<https://artofthechristianninja.com/2013/12/20/making-room-for-jesus-redeeming-the-innkeeper/>

The following is adapted from <https://tarajohnsonstories.com/the-innkeeper/>

Get this...some scholars even disagree on what is meant by the word *inn*. We tend to think of it like a hotel. Now by this time the Roman government had probably developed a network of Inns or public housing for travelers, but that is probably not the case in the small town or city called Bethlehem with estimated population between 2000-8000. Bethlehem is a town located about 6 miles south-southwest of Jerusalem.

Some options for the “Inn” include a stone cave, a wooden barn like structure, a camp like enclosed area with tents, a hotel like structure or more likely it was guest rooms attached to people’s homes which they either allowed family to stay or maybe charged for others.



Full-scale model of a typical Israelite home
in
The Semitic Museum at Harvard University

Todd Bolen states this...

“The word translated as ‘inn’ is the word kataluma, which is used elsewhere by Luke and translated as ‘guest chamber’ or ‘upper room’ (Luke 22:11; cf. Mark 14:14) ...The result of this mistranslation leads to a different understanding of the story. It’s not that Joseph and Mary were late to town, but it’s that they were rejected by their family. Clearly they had family members in town, as that was the reason they returned to Bethlehem for the census. That there was no room in the guest chamber for a pregnant woman indicates that they chose not to make room for this unwedded mother. The birth of Jesus in a room where animals lived suggest shame and rejection.” (<http://blog.bibleplaces.com/2006/12/in-typical-christmas-pageant-one-of.html>)

This puts a whole new spin on the birth of Jesus, doesn't it? Rejected by His own, even before birth. The thought of what Mary and Joseph endured as a young couple pierces my heart. In times of desperation, we see the most despicable callousness of humanity, yet also stand in wonder at the sweetness of God's grace and the gentle touch from the kindness of strangers.

Whether "No room" was the result of a stressed out innkeeper or judgmental family members, the result was the same...those who pushed Mary, Joseph and Jesus away missed out on the greatest blessing to ever sweep planet earth. If they only knew Who was coming...if they only knew there were shepherds trembling on a hillside, watching the heavens flood with angels proclaiming the Good News...if they only heard the sound of God filling the quiet room with a lusty cry. The Author of Life crying peace into the darkness. What beauty, what mind-bending astonishment.

Well, let's get back to our story about our "Innkeeper?"

"The inn at Bethlehem has become the most famous of all inns—not because of what happened there, but because of something that might have happened, but didn't. How does the Bible say it? You know the words by heart, "She brought forth her first born Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and laid Him in a manger, for there was no room for them in the inn." Now interestingly enough, while virtually every retelling of the Christmas story includes as one of its characters the innkeeper at Bethlehem, the fact of the matter is that he is not even mentioned directly in the Bible. However, this innkeeper

has become a kind of symbol of the inhospitality of the human spirit. We think of the innkeeper and his inn, and we are moved to ask why is there no room in the inn for the Lord of glory? Why is He shut out of so many hearts? Now I know you may have come here today wanting to feel the rosy glow of the season and wanting to hear a syrupy-sweet version of the Christmas story. I'm sorry. I cannot give you that. The Bible states quite specifically that on the first Christmas in the very first place God, in Jesus Christ, came to in this world, he was turned away. I believe that in this Christmas season it behooves us to try to understand why". <https://thewordmadefresh.org/sermons/innkeeper-when-god-knocks-how-will-you-answer/>

Life happens, and if we are not careful, our "inn" fills up so fast that before we know it there is no room left for Jesus. Busyness can be deceiving. It makes us feel like our life is too full, when actually our life may have become empty.

Let's imagine what the original Innkeeper may have been struggling with...

PERHAPS THE INNKEEPER'S PROBLEM WAS MISPLACED PRIORITIES.

"There was no room in the inn because the inn was full. Others had come first. We can sympathize with the innkeeper. He was not a mean man. He harbored no ill-will toward the Holy Family. It's just that he was in business. He had a hotel to run. There was no more room—and that was that. We can understand. When the motel is full, they turn on a sign: "No vacancy." It's a

matter of priorities. It's a matter of who gets there first. We can understand that.

So the inn was full. Yes, we can understand that. But don't you see that by just such understandable circumstances the Lord of life may be shut out of the inn of our hearts? Priorities—the things that get there first—that's what counts. We aren't blasphemous when it comes to the things of God; it's just that we have some things in our lives which we consider to be of more pressing importance. We have no ill-will toward Jesus Christ; it's just that we fill up all the heart-space we have with other guests and other matters. We get caught up in commerce and convention and custom and people and profits. We've got our work, our social life, our civic responsibilities, our hunting trips, our ballgames, our shopping sprees, our family concerns. The place is full, I tell you! No vacancy. How can anything else get in?

So often Christ gets crowded out by other matters—or at least He gets the leftovers, the tag ends, the loose change—whatever we have left after the best has been taken. The things that matter most in life seem to be at the mercy of the things that matter last. We get so lost in the thick of thin things that even at this time of the year we make little time for prayer and meditation. We get so wrapped up in the business of busyness that we forget about sending in our pledge card for the extension of God's kingdom. We are so quick to respond to the urgent that we forget about the important, like considering the question “Should we make a commitment and join the church?” So many times, it seems, that when the high and holy things come knocking at our door, we aren't in or we

don't hear or we have no more room in our hearts. A poet has put words into the innkeeper's mouth which he then addresses to us:

I only did what you have done
A thousand times or more,
When Joseph came to Bethlehem
And knocked upon my door.
I didn't turn the Christ away
Or leave Him there bereft;
Like you, I only gave to Him
Whatever I had left.

Sometimes Jesus gets shut out of our lives by misplaced priorities”. <https://thewordmadefresh.org/sermons/stable-snapshots-the-innkeeper/>

PERHAPS THE INNKEEPER'S PROBLEM WAS MISREAD OPPORTUNITIES.

This innkeeper has been discussed for two thousand years, and why? Because he missed his moment of opportunity when it came. Granted it was a pressure-packed time for him. His inn was like a hive at swarming, and when there came yet one more knock at his door, he never realized that what was about to happen was in fact the most important thing that would happen to him in all of his life. Strange isn't it, that time is best measured not by its duration, but by its content? One can live more in an hour than in a week. Sometimes whole centuries are defined by what happens in a single day. When a moment comes, we can exalt it or we can debase it by what we do with it. So many times so much is won or lost on the basis of what we do with a moment of opportunity when it comes. The knock at the door was heard, but the

innkeeper missed his moment. He said, “Sorry, I have no room.” Now if he had known the identity of his guests, if he had even dreamed that the child born in the stable would split history in two, and that for all the centuries to come the world would date its letters from that very night, well you can be sure that he would have made room somewhere. He would have made some arrangements. He didn’t know that that traveler and his wife, burdened with an unborn child, were so important, but then we never do know when God comes knocking on our door.

We are impressed with shiny things, showy things, and noisy things. For us greatness must come clothed in garments of grandeur. God must be impressive when He comes, but the fact is that is seldom the case. A manger, straw, peasants, donkey, a woman great with child—who would ever recognize God’s coming in such common, ordinary things. How often we miss Him; shut Him out, because we do not recognize the humility of our God. When God comes to us in the person of some hungry woman, or some lonely man, or some confused teenager, or some neglected child, we can so easily turn away—ignoring Him as if He were not there. Interesting isn’t it how in every way God chooses to come to us, we are free to simply turn our backs and look in another direction? The cry of a child in a manger—who but God would have thought of that as the way to lay hold of the human heart forever. Our problem is we try to gild the story. We try to provide it with splendor, grandeur, and romance, but there is no way to get around the truth. That stable was a dirty, unromantic place. God was trying to tell us, you see, that holy things are lowly things, that the mighty things are the

little things. That’s the way God’s greatness comes to us—born small in a sorry place, often rejected and shut out, with only a few lowly shepherds and a few wise men with the insight to see in it the glory of God. You see, it takes a most receptive heart to recognize God’s knock at the door when it comes. Yes, so many times Jesus gets shut out of our lives by misread opportunities.

PERHAPS THE INNKEEPER’S PROBLEM WAS MISDIRECTED DESIRES.

Christ was shut out by His own people, and still is, because in some rooms of our inn He is not welcome. That is the tragic note in the Christmas story—the rejection of the way of Jesus Christ—the rejection of the revolutionary changes He brings. If you do not see what happened in the doorway of that inn as a foreshadowing of the cross, then you have not really heard the Christmas story. There were those in His day who listened to Him, and when they heard what He was really saying, they asked Him to get out. Ultimately, of course, they pinned Him to a tree, because they did not want to yield to the demand that Christ’s way is the only way. Make no mistake, Jesus Christ cannot enter a life without radically changing that life.

Do you remember the story of Bret Harte called “The Luck of Roaring Camp”? It’s always been required reading in high school American Literature classes. Roaring Camp was a rough, tough mining town. The town was all men, just one woman. Her name was Cherokee Sal. She had a baby and then she died. So here were all these men with this little baby girl in a crude wooden box.

The men decided that the baby shouldn't be in such a box, so one of them went to Sacramento and purchased a beautiful crib. Then they noticed that the rags the baby was wearing didn't look appropriate for that crib. So they ordered up some lacy, frilly clothes for the baby girl. Then one of the men said: "Did you ever notice how dirty this floor is?" So they got down on hands and knees and scrubbed the floor. Of course that just made the walls and ceilings look worse, so they whitewashed them and they hung curtains in the windows. And because the baby needed to sleep, the men agreed to cut out their carousing at night. Periodically they would take the baby out for what they called "an airing." Of course, they couldn't have the mines looking ugly then, so they cleaned up the area and planted flowers. They even refrained from using rough speech because it wasn't appropriate for the baby's ears. The whole town of Roaring Camp was transformed because of the coming of that little baby.

Of course, it's an allegory of Christmas. It's at this season, especially, when Jesus comes seeking to gain entrance to our hearts. But when He enters in, He changes things. He seeks repentance. He seeks reversal. We can fool ourselves some of the time, and we can fool other people a lot of the time, but we cannot fool Him even for a moment. He comes with the searchlight of His purity right into the center of our lives. He is ready to work the same miracles in our heart that He worked in Bethlehem and other places so long ago. He is ready to take blindness away and enable us to see His will. He is ready to make mute lips speak a good word for His kingdom. He is ready to remove deafness so that we can hear the

cries of need in our world. He's ready to cleanse us from the leprosy of sin and to take death and to transform it so that it begins to tremble into life. He is ready and willing and able to do these things. He is ready to change our lives. The problem is that there are those who don't want to make the changes He requires. So they say, "No room." Here is the great message of Christmas I want us to grasp. We must make room for Jesus Christ here—in our politics, in our business, in our learning, in our playing, in our homes, and most of all, in our hearts. And we must do it soon. We need to quit fooling ourselves into thinking that someday we shall find room for Him. You see, we'll never find room—we have to make it—and we have to make it now. We need to choose now between things that do not matter and the one thing that matters above all else: Jesus Christ. For if we have no room in our hearts and lives for Him now, then in the end He will have no room for us". <https://thewordmadefresh.org/sermons/innkeeper-when-god-knocks-how-will-you-answer/>

Conclusion: Will you make room for Jesus today and every day in the future? We may not be able to go back in time and help out baby Jesus, but we can reach out and make room in our lives, our families, our churches, our pocketbooks, for people all around us. Remember the scripture where Jesus said..."

Matthew 25:44-45.. " 'Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?' 'He will reply, 'Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me.'