

December 23, 2012
Fourth Sunday in Advent
The National Presbyterian Church

The Innkeeper: Squeaking In

Luke 2:1-8

Dr. David Renwick

Through the season of Advent, the weeks leading up to Christmas, we've been looking at different groups of people, various characters, caught up in the Christmas story.

Prophets. For example, long before Jesus is born there are the prophets who enter the story by looking into the future and seeing that God is going to be sending a king (God's king, the Messiah) into this world. These prophets are amazed at what they see and they write it down. So we find prophecies scattered throughout the Old Testament portion of the Bible about a Messiah coming (Handel in his Messiah picks up on so many of these passages). And in time it happens: the Messiah King, Jesus, comes! The prophets challenge us to think about what it is that we carry in our minds about the future; not only to remember that the future belongs to God, but to realize that the way we think about our future, just as with the way we think about our past, affects how we live in the present. So how do you think about the future? Is it God's

future that you're concerned about or are looking for? Or is it some other, less certain future? So we thought together about the prophets.

Kings. Then we thought about the kings who enter into this story. There is the bad king Herod who uses brute force to get his way. There are the three wise men who are also known as the "three kings," who use knowledge, the knowledge of the heavens, to reflect on the will of God. They see their power that comes through knowledge as being a power given to them by another, and they wield it as stewards of the grace of God. And then there is another king in the story (the one to whom the prophets looked!) and that king is Jesus. In the story he doesn't look like a king (he's just a baby – he looks absolutely powerless) but he's the one who, through the power of sacrificial love, will turn the whole world upside down – changing the course of human history. The power of sacrificial love! So we need to reflect on how we think about and use the power that we've been given. What place does it have within our lives?

Shepherds. Then we looked at the shepherds who seem to be at the low end of the power spectrum, feeling as if they have absolutely no power at all. For the most part that would have been the case; the world goes on around about them, events happen beyond their control (like the awful shooting at Sandy Hook last week); and what are they (and we) to do in this world in which so many things happen that are beyond our control? Sometimes we feel small and insignificant and absolutely lost in this world. And the shepherds surely felt like that . . . until they were told that *they were the first ones, the very*

first ones on God's heart and God's mind to see the newborn king when he came. Not forgotten by God, but at the center of God's attention, no matter how they felt about themselves – invited first. And we too are like that: it's as if God has no other children except you and me; we too are invited first.

The Innkeeper. We come this morning to think about the innkeeper in the story that we read earlier in the 2nd Chapter of Luke's gospel – except if you were listening closely, or if you know the Bible, you will know that there is no innkeeper! Even though you've been through dozens of pageants in which there's always an innkeeper, there is no innkeeper mentioned explicitly in the story. Of course, here had to be somebody though (it could have been an innkeeper, or it could have been a relative of Joseph) who shared the tough news with Jesus' parents, Mary and Joseph, when they came to Bethlehem, traveling down 70 or 80 miles from Nazareth on foot or on a donkey. It must have been miserable arriving at Bethlehem, only to hear someone say *"Listen, sorry, but I don't have a place for you!"* (The word for inn could mean guestroom as well as inn). *"Don't have a place for you. There's no room in the inn. There's no room in the guest room. You didn't call ahead to make a reservation did you? Leave a credit card number, did you? It's after 6:00 p.m., the place is full it's packed. But do I have a deal for you: I have a room with some animals in it."* Now downstairs in some houses in the winter animals were welcomed in, keeping them warm and keeping the house warm. Forget the smell, it helped to be warm. It could have been in a room, could have been in a stable, could have been in a cave we don't really

know. But that was the only option for Mary and for Joseph.

And it's that moment that I'd like us to think about; when they heard the bad news! So the scene I have in mind is not just of the innkeeper but of Mary and Josephs standing before the innkeeper when he shared this news with them – and *their sense* of what surely must have been utter disappointment and deflation. Not expecting the Hilton but just something by themselves. And they stand there. And she's about to have a baby. And this is not right. And there is this massive let down.

I don't know what you'd have done at that particular time but I find these moments pretty difficult to handle. There's always the temptation to bring out the atomic bomb at such moments: the unleashing of temper and the 'grand rationale'! Do you know what the atomic bomb would be in this case? It would be Joseph saying to the innkeeper, "You just don't get it! You don't know who we are, or who my wife is, do you? You don't know who this baby is who she's carrying. She's the mother of God! You've got to do better than this. ***Do something*** for us! ***Now!***"

Well the scripture doesn't say that they dropped this bomb. In fact the story is very sparing. It just says *"the time came for her to be delivered and she brought forth her first born son and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn."* That's it, quiet, peaceful. No bomb. No explosion. The story just keeps on moving, as if Mary and Joseph simply rolled with it.

Now I don't know about you, but I know some people, not many people but some people who have that ability to face disappointment and to roll with it like this, without making a big fuss or a big scene. And generally, I'd say that those who are able to do this can do so because they have a sense of who they are and what their business in life is. And, being confident, they don't have to push themselves or thrust themselves on other people. And this much is clear in the story: that Mary knew who she was, and Joseph too.

Mary knew who she was. She discovered this when the angel came to her earlier in the story in Luke Chapter 1. She may not have known much before then, but when the angel came and said "you're going to carry the Son of God – no earthly father but God will be the father of this child," *she didn't grow proud, but she grew humble.* She had a sense of enormous privilege – privileged that this should happen to her. And she says to the angel "*Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to His word.*"

Behold I am the handmaid of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to His word. Well, that's what the King James Version says: "the handmaid of the Lord." It sounds so rosy and lovely. But the actual word in Greek, *doulē*, is not so sweet: it means slave. Mary is saying not just she's a "lady in waiting" but that she's a slave: a slave of the Lord, a person who will do whatever the Lord wants. And she sees this as a privilege! Even though the coming baby was an inconvenience, a complete disruption to her plans, the source of interminable rumor about her morality – she rolls with it all the way down to Bethlehem, no guest room, into the stable with the manger. And life goes on.

I don't know what you do when you face disappointment like that and when you are tempted to pull out whatever your nuclear bomb might be, to lay it on somebody else. As I say, I'm not very good at restraint at such moments. But when I'm doing it right there are a couple of things I choose to do.

First, I think of people God has brought into my life whom I've watched handle these situations well. Sometimes these people are people I've met on mission trips – like a man named Valentine who lives in Tegucigalpa in Honduras. I met him some years ago not long after hurricane Mitch devastated that part of the world. I was with a group helping to rebuild different parts of that community. Valentine lived in Tegucigalpa and he was a teacher. Now he had no education but he was a teacher. He was just two steps ahead of his students. He was a lover of God through Jesus Christ and whatever he learned he passed on to somebody else. He had to walk about five miles to get to the place where he taught. Once in a while he might have been able to afford to catch the bus. But there was no complaining in him. He saw it as a privilege that he could teach like this.

One day we went with him to where he lived; it was one of those places you see in pictures of poverty in developing nations: a hillside covered with hovels, with huts. And he led us into his home, a cinder block building with two rooms, no doors, led us in – was proud to show us where he lived. We looked out the back and said what's back there? He said the latrine is back there. It's a part of the hillside. He told us how it

worked. We asked him about other aspects of his life and family and then we began thinking about the rain. What happens when it rains? "Oh," he says, "well, there are just torrents of water coming down the hillside on the street, and yes, through the back yard." In the back yard? Yes in the back yard: the water flows down from one latrine to the other all the way down the hillside, and then, in Valentine's case (and many others too) straight through his house and on down the hill. And so he tells us this, and then it's time for us to move on.

And we suddenly realize we're in the presence of somebody whose life is pushed and pulled by every force, and yet who gets on with it in a way that we can hardly conceive. He knows he is a child of God and has a calling, and calmly shares this with us who have no clue how wealthy we are. He simply gets on with it. So sometimes I think of those people and maybe you know somebody like that in your life.

Then, second, I also think of a poem which I first read and memorized long ago, at the time I entered the ministry. Since that time I've not been able to forget it. God brings it back to mind from time to time! It goes like this:

'Father where shall I work today?
And my love flowed warm and free.
And he pointed out a tiny spot and said,
'Tend that for me.'
I answered him,
'Oh no, not that – why nobody would ever see,
No matter how well my work was done –
not that little place for me.'

He answered me tenderly,
'Ah, little one check that heart of thine;
Are you working for them [whoever 'they' are],
or for me?'

Nazareth was a little place and so was Galilee.

[V. Raymond Edmond, "The Disciplines of Life," p. 209]

God's greatest work was done in the middle of nowhere, through people who were willing to roll with it, all the way down to Bethlehem, and then to find there was no room in the inn, only the next best place that the innkeeper had: do I have a deal for you, you can just squeak in, with the animals. But in that moment, that disappointing, deflating moment, God was at work!

And so God wants to work through us whether life goes our way or not, knowing that we too are children of God. We know who we are and we have been given a calling by God to serve Him in some way. And we must hold on to that: children of God, servants of God, slaves of God as if it were the greatest privilege in the world; a gift and calling that comes to each of us through this new born child.

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THE NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH
4101 Nebraska Avenue, N.W. Washington, DC 20016
www.NationalPres.org 202.537.0800