

Christmas Eve 2020
Isaiah 9:2, 6-7 and Luke 2:1-20
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When Emperor Augustus's decree was announced in Nazareth, Joseph gave it little attention. The news of a global accounting of all people, big as it was, paled in comparison to the upheaval in his own life: a pregnant fiancé, an angel's nighttime visit, a household to establish, a baby on the way. By the time Joseph had attended to the chaos, or at least adjusted to his new reality, it was nearly time to travel. Technically, Mary didn't have to accompany him, but he had no intention of leaving her home alone so close to the baby's arrival. They traveled for ten days, heading southward from Galilee into Judea. Joseph had not been to Bethlehem since his childhood, when he used to roam the hills with his cousins. While they journeyed, he reminisced about those carefree days, how his grandfather would tell stories about King David each evening, how deeply the sense of sacred space permeated the streets.

In a normal visit, Joseph would have asked one of his relatives for lodging. Peasant homes were simple structures, a main room for living, an ancillary space for livestock, and a small room for guests. But these were not normal times. The sleepy town of Bethlehem was full of travelers. In his preoccupation with his own dilemmas, amid his haste to get on the road, Joseph realized he had neglected this core duty of securing a place for Mary to rest. He hoped a space would materialize when they arrived. Perhaps things would turn out better than he feared. But they found no such favor. They were newlyweds whose story still smelled of scandal. You know what it's like to be the last or the least, the one assigned to the couch in the living room, or given a blanket for the floor. It's an indignity pressed upon the already stigmatized. "While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

Separated by millennia, and Luke himself not an eye-witness to the birth, we can't know how many doors Joseph knocked upon while Mary's time came ever closer, seeking hospitality for his pregnant wife, seeking shelter for their tumultuous journey. Even Luke's word choice creates ambiguity. An inn might be a guest house, a room for guests in a private home, or space in the main living area. Whichever inn Luke intended; the crucial detail remained: there was no room. The space Mary and Joseph were granted was the one for animals, adjacent to the elements outdoors. When we retell the story, we soften the details, shifting the spotlight to lowing cattle, visiting shepherds, or the dazzling star. We conjure up an insensitive innkeeper, giving the story a rascally opponent who relents to let them sleep among the straw. But hear it afresh: there was no room.

There is no room, for you who are vulnerable, dirty, needing privacy to birth a baby into the world. There is no room. Even now there is no room. There are no rooms in the hospitals nor space in the funeral homes. There is no room for mercy amid governmental machinations for those without work, no margin of error for those balancing the bills. There seems precious little space for negotiation or welcome of difference, no protection for the marginal or justice for the

victims. The rich can buy a room, but for the poor, excluded, inconvenient, or ashamed there is no room. And lately, I have felt there was no more room in my heart for any more grief or outrage, no space to lament or tears. My heart has run out of room.

A baby, of course, is not paying attention to the adults shuffling around, making provisions. The baby simply senses it is time to be born. His parents' hearts grow at the sight of his rounded head, tiny nose, and perfect toes. The animals also shuffle back, make space such that his bed in the feeding trough is clear. His birth brings out the angels, who surprise the shepherds, themselves huddled outside of town beyond the bounds of respectability. A baby has been born who is your Savior, the Messiah who comes so that there is more room.

The baby, all on its own, creates room: for tears, lullabies, laundry, for hope-filled wonderings about the future, for hours spent simply holding love made flesh. Jesus, born into a world that said there is no room for you, by his birth creates the space where God lives beside us, reworking the world's imbalances, righting its injustices, showering good favor on anyone who feels locked out from love.

In the chapel of an English monastery stands a limestone statue of Mary and the Christ child. Mary is standing, holding the baby such that Jesus is facing outwards – toward us – with his arms spread out, the backs of his wrists against Mary's shoulders. Preacher Martin Smith confessed, "I prayed in front of this form for a week before I realized Jesus, the baby, had adapted the form he will take when they nail him to the cross."¹ God who comes in Christ, Smith suggests, stands upon us in crucified companionship, willing to keep watch with us during the worst of these days, willing to welcome us into the great room of his everlasting love. As Smith continued praying in front of the statue, he said, "I felt Mary beckoning me closer, as if to ask 'Do you want to hold him?'" Will you take Jesus, this crucified companion, in your arms? An absurd idea and yet here he is ... the Savior of the world, nestling into your embrace, creating space for a new kind of peace, indestructible, a new type of love, enduring beyond the heartache, and asking you to make room in your heart for him.

Dear people of God, I bring to you good news of a great joy, for all people, to you is born this day a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Make room for him. Amen.

¹ Smith, Martin L. "Would You Like to Hold Him?" in *Nativities and Passions: Words for Transformation* (Boston: Cowley, 1995), 3-7.