

2B-05
Nativity
December 25, 2011

WELCOME THE LORD

Isaiah 52:7-10

Luke 2:1-7

Today I would like to share the very familiar story about Jesus' birth and how our assumptions about what the story says affects the way we understand what's going on. The story is our Gospel lesson, especially verses 6 and 7. They read:

⁶ While they [Mary & Joseph] were there, the time came for the baby to be born, ⁷ and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Okay, here's the story as we are most familiar with what I would call the "traditional" interpretation.

The story began with the fact that Mary was pregnant by power of the Holy Spirit and that she was going to give birth to the Messiah, whom she was to name, Jesus. Caesar Augustus, ruler of the entire Roman Empire, including Palestine and Judea, had ordered all men to be registered in their cities of ancestry, or origin. This call for registration was most likely in order to tax people.

According to Luke there lived in Nazareth a man whose name was Joseph. He was betrothed to a young woman, Mary. Betrothed meant that they were promised for each other. It is a

stronger concept than our understanding of engagement. But the marriage had not been consummated.

Joseph's city of origin was Bethlehem, so he had to travel from Nazareth to Bethlehem in order to comply with Caesar Augustus' order to register. So Joseph and Mary pack up and travel to Bethlehem. Just when they get to Bethlehem, Mary goes into labor. Joseph searches frantically for a room, but all the hotels and motels are full. There was just no room in the inn.

Finally Joseph and Mary were allowed to stay in a barn, because there was no other place to stay. And that night, baby Jesus was born. Since they were in a barn, Mary and Joseph used a manger in which to place the baby.

And so you have the traditional understanding about what Luke 2:1-7 says. The town was crowded, the hotels and motels were all full, so one of the innkeepers let them use the nearby barn.

But did it REALLY happen that way? Listen again to the story, only this time I shall try to explain it from a Middle Eastern point of view as expressed in the writings of Professor Kenneth Bailey, New Testament scholar whose ministry was in the Middle East. You might be surprised at the major, but wonderful difference of interpretation.

The story again begins with Caesar Augustus requiring all the men to be registered from their towns of origin. So Mary and Joseph pack up and travel the fairly long distance from Nazareth to Bethlehem, Joseph's city of origin. (So far the

same basic story.). Now listen to how a Middle-Eastern understanding would interpret very differently this same story.

Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem; Mary is pregnant and they must find a place to stay. However there are no hotels or motels for visitors to spend the night; they don't even exist in the first place! Most homes, however, had guest rooms. You see, almost every house in the Middle East, at that time, had a guest room that they allowed travelers, or guests to stay. Sometimes these guest rooms were above the living quarters of the family and sometimes the guest rooms were beside the main house. Either way, because of the crowd of people who had come to register, by order from Caesar all the guest rooms were full.

Even though our Bibles most often say, "Because there was no room in the inn" we are misguided to think that the situation was like trying to check into a "no-rooms-left" Motel 6. It was not. Instead it was a matter of finding a guest room attached to a house that was not already occupied, but there was no empty guest room to find.

One of the biblical clues we have for this idea is that the Greek word used in verse 7 for "inn" is used only one (1) other time in Luke's Gospel. Luke used the same word for the upper room that Jesus and his disciples used in order to celebrate their last supper, just before Jesus was arrested.

It also helps to know HOW the house itself was built. Inside, the main part of the house was split level. On the upper level is where the family lived and slept. On the lower level the

livestock (not many, but a couple cows, chickens, a sheep, or goat) were brought in so that they could be safe for the night.

Right on the edge between the upper and lower level of the family quarters was a trough so that the livestock could come and feed. It was called a manger.

Again, the scripture said that they wrapped the baby in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was “no room in the inn.” The latest edition of the NIV Bible translates the phrase more accurately, “and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son, she wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no GUEST ROOM available for them. That removes our pre-conceived assumption that it was a Motel 6.

So what? Well I’m getting to that. If Jesus was laid in a manger, then what happened was that the host family took in Mary and Joseph and allowed them to stay in the actual living quarters of their home. So, when Jesus was born it was only natural to use the nearby manger to place the child for rest.

I ask, “So what, again?” Now, no longer is this a story in which Bethlehem was being mean and cruel to the new-born Messiah. Rather, we have a story based upon Middle Eastern hospitality that accommodates the traveler in whatever way possible – **EVEN IF IT MEANT TO INVITE THEM INTO THEIR OWN LIVING QUARTERS!** Middle Eastern hospitality would never leave someone out in the “cold!” The host family invited the Holy Family into their home, their living quarters; their guest room had been taken.

Here is the moral of the story. Can we do the same thing? Can we invite the LORD into our living space, into our lives, just like that host family did for Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus?

Too often we leave very little room in our hearts for Jesus. And we are the poorer for it. Instead, the moral of the story is like the hymn: *Into My Heart*.

1. Come into my heart, O Lord Jesus,
Come into my heart, I pray;
My soul is so troubled and weary,
Come into my heart, today.

Chorus

Into my heart, into my heart,
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus;
Come in today, come in to stay,
Come into my heart, Lord Jesus.

And that is our Christmas message. I call on us to invite anew the Lord back into our hearts to live – where He belongs. Merry Christmas.

The Rev. Daniel E. Hale, D. Min.