

## *A place at the inn*

Christmas Eve 2019

Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

*There was no place for them in the inn...*

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Those few words from tonight's Nativity gospel came to my mind a week ago, as I delved into an article about the first-ever United Nations Global Refugee Forum that had just ended. Participants had gathered in Geneva to compare resources and strategies in response to the doubling of refugees, to more than 25 million, over the past decade. Add to that number those fleeing domestic violence, the chronic homeless and others with no reliable place to call home, and number of displaced people worldwide jumps from over 25 million to more than 70 million men, women and children.

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Troubling as these numbers may be, most of us here may hold them at bay in the realm of abstraction. But closer to home, some of us here can count ourselves among the 43% of Americans who feel lonely on a regular basis – often most acutely at this time of year. The figures are alarmingly higher not only among senior citizens but also for millennials and teens.

One lonely soul from Tulsa, Oklahoma, was profiled in a New York Times story last week. She had posted this message on Craigslist: “Anybody need a grandma for Christmas [?] - I have nobody and would really like to be part of a family. I cook and can cook dinner ....” She went on, in ALL CAPS, “I HAVE NOBODY AND IT REALLY HURTS! Let me be part of your family.” Some of us here also have no family, or we may have a biological family but no sense of real belonging to it. We may know what it's like to be shown the EXIT door from the place where we thought we belonged. We may be constantly surrounded by many people and yet feel lonely.

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Sometimes it may feel as if there is no place for us at the inn.

The moment in the well-known gospel text from Luke is included to explain why the Son of God was born in a feeding trough for barn animals. “... she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” But as we read on in Luke's story of Jesus, he will introduce us to characters who show us our human instincts for immediate self-gratification, our laughter at the expense of others, our preference for revenge rather than reconciliation. In Luke we will see instances of our strategies to shift blame from ourselves onto others. We see how bad religion can keep us from, rather than draw us to, God. And in the end we will see how our world proved inhospitable to the ways of God embodied and lived by Jesus.

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In the end, we said to him, “There's no place for you here in this world.”

Before he was sentenced to death for his reforming ways, however, Jesus made places at the inn of his divine heart for so many. “Prodigal sons should be welcomed home,” he suggested, “and with no parole or other conditions.” “The pox on Samaritans, and on others whom you so easily write off, must be lifted. They can be living examples of God's mercy as well as anyone. They, also, are worthy of being seen and known as children of God.” Even as he hung on the cross Jesus responded to a felon's plea for mercy: “...today you will be with me in Paradise.” Or, in other words, “Welcome home. There's a place for you at the inn.”

The Greek word from the ancient text translated as inn is *kataluma* (κατάλυμα). The word could mean a variety of public or private spaces. It doesn't clarify the exact kind of place where there was no room for the Holy Family. But what about the fact that *kataluma* is found in only one other place in Luke's gospel? On the night before he died for us, Jesus had sent some disciples to a particular home to inquire 'Where is the κατάλυμα, the guest room, where I may eat the Passover with my disciples?' I can't help but wonder if Luke is implicitly contrasting the two uses of the word in his gospel. In the first instance, the inn is the place where there is no room. In the second instance, in the fullness of time, the guest room becomes the place where the sacred meal is prepared, and shared. It is the same table and meal at which Christ continues to eagerly welcome you and me and all. Here, Jesus was and is saying, "There is room at the inn."

Take a moment, if you will, to peer into the Nativity painting on the cover of the worship leaflet this evening. At the back of the scene you will see some characters on the outside, looking in. They are commonly identified as the shepherds. And maybe they are. And maybe, in addition, the artist wanted us to see them as stand-ins for you or me—peering in from the outside, wondering, hoping, praying that there may be a place for us in the divine mystery and wonder there.

One obvious stand-in for those on the outside looking in might be that grandma from Tulsa. Her Craigslist post received so many cruel responses that she took it down almost immediately. But a 21-year-old man, Carson Carlock, saw the post and tracked her down. Carson learned her name, Carrie, and after some back and forth online, they agreed to meet in a McDonalds parking lot. The New York Times story explains that "When she saw him ... she burst into tears ... The two embraced and wept." Later she said, "I don't want anybody to feel the way I felt. Most of us just want the feeling of love and belonging."

Carrie may as well have said, "We all want to believe and feel that there's a place for us at the inn." When we direct that want to Jesus, the answer is yes. And often, as Carson Carlock reminds us, that place of belonging sometimes opens in us when we make a place for others at the inn of our own lives. Amen.



*The Annunciation to the Shepherds* from a Book of Hours prepared for King Louis VII in anticipation of his 1499 Coronation, Provence, Georges Trubert, The Victoria & Albert Museum, London.