

Rev. Timothy B. Tutt, Senior Minister  
Westmoreland Congregational United Church of Christ  
Bethesda, Maryland

Saturday, December 24, 2016  
Christmas Eve  
10:00 PM

**“An HGTV Special”**

*Luke 2*

*“...and while they were there, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”*

The poor innkeepers has been the subject of much Christmas speculation.

*“...there was no room for them in the inn.”*

Was the innkeeper mean? After all, why did he—and we mostly think of him as a he, I suppose—why did he turn away this poor couple—Mary great with child?

What about the other guests? If the inn was full, why didn't the innkeeper ask some of the able-bodied, non-pregnant guests to sleep out in the stable and let Mary rest by the fire?

Some people have said that the innkeeper was doing Mary a favor. If the inn was full – crowded with travelers—maybe the manger was the quietest, most private place available?

Who knows?

What we do know is that the innkeeper is made up. The Bible doesn't mention an innkeeper.

What if...?

What if the Bible doesn't mention an inn?

I know we read those words – "...because there was no room for them in the inn."

But what if the Bible doesn't say that?

Remember the Gospel of Luke, of course, was not written in English. It was written in Greek. What we are reading is a translation.

The oldest Greek versions of Luke, for this sentence about the inn in chapter 2, say EN TOU TOPOS AUTOS EN KATALYMA.

The word that is translated as "inn" is, in Greek, KATALYMA.

Luke uses that same word much later in the gospel. In Chapter 22, when Luke writes about where Jesus and his disciples will eat the Passover meal he uses the word KATALYMA again. They will eat the Passover meal—what we call the Lord's Supper or communion—they will eat that meal in a KATALYMA.

And in Chapter 22 most of the English translations of the Bible—the NRSV, the NIV, the King James, and others—translate KATALYMA as "guest room."

So, if KATALYMA is guest room in one place, it really should be "guest room" in both places.

So it might be a better translation for the Christmas story to say that "*...Mary gave birth to her firstborn son and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the guest room.*"

A guest room is different from an inn.

What if Mary and Joseph were not renting a room? What if they were staying with their family? They had gone to Bethlehem for the census because Joseph's family was from Bethlehem. So what if, when they went for the census, they weren't at an inn

at all? What if they were staying with Joseph's parents. What if Mary gave birth at her in-laws' house? Or what if they were staying with Joseph's crazy cousin Carl? Or his Aunt Agnes or Uncle Ezra, you know, the one who drinks a little, maybe like your Aunt Agnes?

What if the Bible doesn't mention an innkeeper because there wasn't an innkeeper? What if their family members sent them out to the manger?

Does that make the story better or worse for you?

The idea of Mary giving birth to Jesus at a relative's house makes the story more personal for me.

If there was no room at an inn, it's easy to blame the innkeeper. And I'm not an innkeeper, so I can just point fingers at someone who is not like me.

But if the story is set in the middle of a family, then it becomes personal. Because we are part of a family of some sort or another.

And beyond our immediate families, we are all part of the human family.

As a member of the human family I think of the people we turn away from our homes. The terrible, terrible situation in Syria is much on my mind this Christmas season. I can't imagine what those poor people in Aleppo and other places are going through. I cannot imagine what it is like to be forced to flee a country carrying a baby or traveling with aging parents. I cannot imagine what it is like to live in homes with bombs falling around, trying to keep your loved ones safe. And I simply cannot fathom how we in this country have been so unwelcoming.

As a human family we seem to think the guest room is full.

Imagine this story on a more personal level as well.

Who are the people you spend Christmas with? Whom do you welcome to your home? Who welcomes you into their home? Or, who are the people you don't welcome into your home? And who are the people who don't welcome you into their homes? Families can be remarkable places of nurture and care. And families can be places of deep pain and hurt.

Hospitality, though—this notion of who we welcome into our homes—is one of the traditional virtues of Christianity. But somehow—with our obsession with private property and locks on every door—we have lost much of our sense of hospitality.

John Chrysostom had something to say to Christians about hospitality. John Chrysostom was the archbishop of Constantinople—now Istanbul. He lived in the 300s.

John preach a sermon in which he said, “Make yourself a guest chamber in your house.” (I've mentioned this sermon of John's before, because I think this ancient sermon is so relevant and maybe because I wrestle with his words.) “Make yourself a guest chamber in your house,” John Chrysostum said, “Set up a bed and a candlestick. Say, ‘This is Christ's space.’ Even if it is a basement and tiny, Christ won't refuse it. This guest room is for the maimed, the beggars, the homeless.” Be generous, he said. Be humane.

What if...

What if a sign of being a Christian was that each of us has a room where people in need could stay?

Some of you have done this. I have been so impressed and so grateful with the generosity and humanness that many Westmorelanders have shown to people in need.

And that hospitality is not always easy. And some of you have been unwelcomed in the homes of others. Some of you have known the pain of rejection.

But what if...?

What if we could live in Chrysostom's calling? What if hospitality became the hallmark of Christians?

What if hospitality to others became such a thing, that it became the focus of one of those house decorating shows? What if HGTV had a special on Christ rooms for strangers?

What if..."

What if the gospel went like this...

"...and while they were there, the time came for the Syrian refugee mother to deliver her child...."

"...and while they were there the time came for the crack-addicted mother to deliver her child...."

"and while they were there the single dad who lost his job and was trying to care for his aging mother and a toddler knocked on your door..."

"...and while they were there the immigrant without documentation who had fallen terribly ill and needed a place to recuperate rang your doorbell..."

"...and the Syrian mother gave birth to her child... and the mother on crack gave birth to her child... and the unemployed dad with his mother and toddler ... and the very sick migrant worker ... found rest in your house and your house and your house and my house... because there was a place for them in the guest room..."

What if...

What if the Christ-child waits to be born in your house and your house and your house and my house...on this very night?