



December 23-14, 2017
Rev. Megan Hackman
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Inviting God: The Innkeeper Luke 2:1-7

I didn't know when I graduated from college that I would become a pastor. My first job out of college was being an innkeeper!

I was seriously dating my husband, now Pastor Larry, and I didn't want to move away from Chattanooga. I had no idea what to do with a Spanish and religion degree, so... naturally... innkeeping! (Shout out to all you college "undecideds" out there.) My parents and I had dreamed of having a B&B on a lake one day, so we thought, since I was just looking for an in-between job, I'd see if we had the chops for it. I thought it'd be fun! Hosting guests. Well, turns out, innkeeping is *work*. By the time I left, this was my routine: 5am water the plants, make breakfast, serve breakfast, get people set out, then start climbing four flights of stairs, clean rooms, laundry in the basement, back up, clean, laundry, then fancy hor'deurves for everyone to have as they arrived back. My innkeeping career was nine months.

We're going to look at the innkeeper in the Christmas story tonight. We don't know a lot about the innkeeper. In fact, we're even assuming there was one from this story. We don't even know the innkeeper's name. But we do know one thing about this innkeeper: God invited him into His story. He didn't have a lot of room for God. But we learn from the innkeeper that if you give Jesus just a little room, he will come and make his home with you.

I'm reading from Luke 2. Luke sets the birth of Jesus in true, world history. He tells us who was ruling and where they were when God came and made his home on earth. Listen to this, Luke 2, beginning with verse 1:

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

I want to take you to Bethlehem and help you see the place where Jesus was born. And I want you to see as we go there that God wants to come here, to your home, and to your family, and into your busyness, too.

I apologize in advance for changing some of the images you've always had of Christmas, but here's the reality of this moment in history in Bethlehem. They were having a government-enforced family reunion. Sounds fun, right? Archaeology and sociology tell us is that Joseph and Mary would have been taken in by extended family when they came to Bethlehem for months. There were no hotels among all Jewish, back country villages. And middle eastern culture in the 1st century meant that *for sure* everyone was going to be taken in. It would have been totally shameful to leave anyone out in the cold, let alone Cousin Joe and his expecting wife, Mary! So everyone in Bethlehem was a super busy "innkeeper."

So what's with verse 7, "there was no room for them in the inn?" Rather than "inn," a better translation is "guest room." There wasn't room in the guest room, so Mary & Joseph stayed in the lower part of the house—the part of the house where the animals stayed!

Middle easterners then and even peasants in Syria now, bring their animals into a sunken layer of their house to sleep. So it's smelly. And dirty. But it's inside. The manger—the feeding place for the animals—was sunken into the middle of the floor.

And tiny infant, baby Jesus in a manger was really sleeping in hay. There just wasn't room for Jesus up in the pretty part of the house that stayed clean.

It's like our innkeeper in the story, if he or she were to live in Gig Harbor, would have put the blow-up mattress in the smelly, downstairs basement of the house. Can I get a show of hands? Who is sleeping on air mattresses this Christmas? Is there any kid here who had to give up their bed? My brother was the one who always had to give up his bed at Christmas. And lo-and-behold, at 36 years old, he's still going to be sleeping on an air mattress at my parent's house Christmas night. We all make space.

Our blow up mattress in the smelly basement—that's the corner that Joseph's relative had to give Mary and Joseph, and they took it. And Jesus was born in that smelly, sunken corner of the house. It is *this* picture of Jesus, who we believe to be the Son of God, a sweet infant, lying on hay in the dirt that has so transformed my heart this month. God wanted to be with us. And so he came. But he came to a tiny town that was packed with too many relatives to stay in the nice spot. And he *chose* that. God *chose* to come to earth, then, there, to them. And Jesus chooses to make his home with us if we will just give him a little room.

Jesus wants to come to you. Whatever the circumstances of your life that you might think would disqualify you from being near to God, the Creator, the all-powerful, I'll tell you, Jesus wants to come to you anyway. And this story of Christmas, and of God inviting the innkeeper—that too-busy, too-full, nameless person, running up and down the stairs cleaning and doing laundry—reminds us that we don't have to get our lives cleaned up before God can come to us! He'll come in the dirt. The innkeeper's role in the story reminds us that if you're just willing to give Jesus *some* room, *any* room, in your life, he'll come and make his home with you.

And actually, it's the places of our lives that are least ready for company—least ready to be made public—where Jesus is *most likely* to show up. Jesus comes most often to us in the

places we are most shamed and broken by. I'd like to share with you about one person who came to know Jesus when she made just a tiny corner for him.

I met a young woman, I'll call her Sarah, after church 4 weeks ago. She wanted to get together to talk about how to start her life with God. It was clear that God was very near to her. But she still had some lingering, tough-to-answer questions about him. When we met, we talked a lot about how to know that God hears us. I encouraged her to go home and start a conversation with God. Just talk with him about specific things. Maybe read the Psalms and see if he has any answers there. I encouraged her to leave space to listen to God. She said she asked specifically for God to help her figure out how to get some counseling. An hour later, another woman she knew texted, "Can you get together tomorrow to talk about how the church can help you get some counseling?" God showed up and moved in! The next Sunday she ran up to me: "I did it! I prayed, and I believe in Jesus!" Now it wasn't a beautiful area of her life she invited him into. It was a painful one. One that still needs to be private for a while. But in those private, painful places, Jesus is so ready to move in and to speak.

I want to invite you—God is inviting you—to let him move into your life, into your heart, into your family. The places he transforms are so beautiful and so free with him there. Jesus totally transformed that dirt floor the innkeeper offered. It isn't known as a dirty space today. It's a holy space! And we put miniatures nativity scenes all over the place, celebrating that Jesus moved in and made his home in the dirtiest place we offered him!

Is there a space *you* could offer Jesus to move in? Maybe there's something that comes immediately to mind for you. There's a memory you want him to move in and transform. There's an emotion that takes over and affects you really negatively, and you want to be done. I invite you as I did Sarah, go home and start a conversation with him. Ask him to change it.

Let me offer you two other invitations to tangible places you might invite Jesus to come and make his home with you: first, you could give one hour a week to God, to talking to him and learning from his Word. We create space for that for you here at Chapel Hill every weekend. 6:30 on Saturdays and 9 and 10:45 on Sundays. Could you carve out just one hour to offer Jesus and to see how he might want to come be with you?

The second invitation is to give God just one meal in January. On Wednesday nights beginning January 10th, we are creating space for you to have conversations about God over dinner. There are no wrong questions there. No one is going to preach at you or tell you you're wrong. It's simply a space to have conversation with other people who want to find out what they really think about God, the Bible, the world, and to explore together how to make sense of it all.

It's called Alpha—Alpha just means a beginning. It's a place to start asking your questions about Jesus. There's no sign up. You're under no obligation. You can come any of the first 3 weeks and just pop in and decide if you want to come back again. But we hope you will want to come back, and that you'll stick around for all 12 weeks of Alpha. But maybe it's be a big

step for you to invite God to just come into one conversation over one dinner. And we welcome you to do that.

God came to earth in the person of Jesus because he wanted to be with you. And with you. And with you. He loves you. And he couldn't imagine eternity without you. So he came to earth and was born in the dirt of a home so that he could make a way for you to come home to him. When people wanted to know how they would find their way to God after Jesus would leave, he told them in John 14:6,

"I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Later in verse 23 he says,

"If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."

The way to God is through Jesus. And the way to answer the heart issues you have, the pain, the envy, the busyness, is to invite Jesus to come and make his home in you. That God might dwell in you. And that you might live with his love and his presence within you. Please give God even the smallest, smelliest, least perfect place in your home and life and ask him once again to come and make his home with you. If you don't know Jesus and want to start a conversation with him tonight, I'm going to help you do that right now. Pray with me.