



MAKING ROOM

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You know how at dinner parents will say things like, “If you want dessert, you have to finish all your broccoli.” You can never get to the good stuff until you’ve dealt with the green stuff. So you shovel it in as fast as you can,

When it comes to the Christmas Eve service, I’m the broccoli. All the kids know they have to get through my sermon before they can get home and get to the good stuff. Just for the record, broccoli is considered a super food. It’s a rich source of nutrients. But I promise we’ll shovel it in pretty quickly tonight.

Starting out the service with those pictures from the kids’ Christmas program takes me clear back to all the Christmas pageants I was part of when I was growing up. I don’t think I ever had a major role. I always wanted to be one of the shepherds because our church had some really cool beards somebody had made out of an old mop. I was a simple boy with simple dreams.

When I got to college, my drama professor always used to say, “There are no small parts. Only small actors.” I think that was just a ploy to get naïve freshmen to take the non-speaking roles. Because there are definitely some small parts, even in the Christmas program. Not just small parts, but undesirable parts. I think the worst part to get was that of the innkeeper. We didn’t have an innkeeper in our production this year, and I think that’s just as well. It’s a terrible role to have to play.

Typically, when there IS an innkeeper in the Christmas pageant, the narrator would read this portion from the book of Luke:

Luke 2:6-7

While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, 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.

While that was being read, the kid playing Joseph would knock on the door of the inn. The innkeeper would open it, shake his head, and close it again. Joseph and Mary would head for the stable and the cold-hearted innkeeper would never be seen or heard from again.

Isn't that a terrible role? Not only do you not get a line – you have to be mean to Mary and Joseph. Nobody likes a “no” person.

I have some good news for you though. There probably never even WAS an innkeeper. I know I'm trampling all over some cherished Christmas traditions here, but there's a good chance there never was an innkeeper who turned out Mary and Joseph for the night.

How can I say that? Well, the Bible never mentions one, and scholars say the word translated in Luke as “inn” can also mean guest room in Greek. It's the same word Luke uses later to describe the upper room where Jesus had his Last Supper. Culturally, it makes more sense to read this as guest room, because there's no record of any hotel type facility in Bethlehem. It was a tiny town, and it wouldn't have been much of a stopping place for travelers since it was so close to Jerusalem.

The more likely scenario of what happened that first Christmas Eve is that Joseph and Mary showed up at a relative's house. Since that was where Joseph's family was from, he probably still had aunts and uncles or distant cousins who still lived in Bethlehem. Because of the census, there were no doubt other out-of-town family members who had arrived there before Mary and Joseph, and they had probably gotten dibs on all the guest beds. However, homes usually had a basement or cave in the back where they kept the animals inside for protection. It would have been dirty and smelly and a far cry from a bedroom. But it was probably part of the same household as the guest room.

Son instead of an innkeeper telling them “no room in the inn” and shutting the door in their face, Mary and Joseph would have been dealing with a familiar face who told them, “You can't have the guest bed, but I've got some room out back.”

Normally, when I've heard sermons based on the imaginary innkeeper, the question always ends up being, “Do you have any room for Jesus?” And that's a good question. But I think the question gets more meaningful when we replace the innkeeper with the relatives. Because then it's not, “Do you have any room?” but “What kind of room are you willing to give Jesus?”

The fact that we're all here tonight means we're all making some sort of space for Jesus in our lives. We're giving up time on a night when it is really tough to pull ourselves away from other fun things. So we can all say we've found room for Jesus. But what KIND of room do we make for him in our daily lives? And how do we move him from out back to the center?

Eugene Peterson tells a story about when he first became a grandfather.

A number of years ago we got a call from our son: “Mom, Dad, Lynn's pregnant. We're going to have a baby.” Their first child. But even more important, our first grandchild. Within days we were driving the two hours to Princeton Seminary where they were students. Jan was excited, brimming with anticipation. But I wasn't feeling much of anything. We had had three children of our own. I didn't see why this was so special –

and there were still six months before we would see the baby. As we got closer to greeting them Jan's anticipation heightened, but somehow this pregnancy hadn't penetrated my emotions. I felt dull, flat, routine.

Driving back home the next day, I complained of my lack of [enthusiasm], an emotion Jan had in excess. "What's wrong with me? Why don't I feel anything?" Jan said, "It's because you've never been pregnant."

"Well that's just great; so what am I going to do about that?"

She told me to build a cradle.

When we got home I went to the public library and found pictures of cradles. I decided on an early American hooded cradle, sketched out some plans, went to a specialty woods shop, examined the stock and chose some Honduras mahogany. Most afternoons I came home an hour or so early from my parish duties to my shop and worked on that cradle. I decided to finish it with applications of oil. I worked on each piece of the cradle with the finest grade of sandpaper, over and over. I then went to fine steel wool, over and over. Each application of oil deepened the color; after several applications it seemed like the wood glowed from within. I worked with each piece of the cradle, shaping it, holding it, rubbing it, over and over and over – and all the time anticipating the baby that would be in that cradle, over and over and over. Jan's prescription worked: I got pregnant. Week after week shaping that cradle, my hands and fingers working the wood, over and over anointing the oil that set the mahogany on fire from within, imagining the developing baby that would soon be swaddled in that cradle, praying in gratitude and anticipation for the life in Lynn's swelling womb. By the time the cradle was ready, I was ready, prepared to receive the gift of new life.

Maybe this Christmas you are feeling like Eugene Peterson – flat, dull, routine. Nothing about Jesus is lighting a fire under you and you can't relate to other people who seem so enthusiastic about God. You're not connecting to any of the joy you hear about all December long.

If that's true, maybe you need to build a cradle – preparing a place for Christ to be in your life.

There are two ways to approach that kind of preparation. The first is what I call the rock star approach. This is how hotels get rooms ready for VIPs. Stars will have all kinds of specific demands in their contract that hotels need to meet if they want them to stay there. It might mean having the room set at a certain temperature or the TV tuned to a certain station. Van Halen had it in writing that they would have a bowl full of M&Ms – with no brown ones in the bowl. Cher demanded a separate room for her wigs. Pavarotti wanted his bedroom completely dark and there couldn't be any kinds of smells in the room. And Iggy Pop requested a Bob Hope impersonator at each stop.

Those are the kinds of demands that are incredibly difficult to ever feel like you've met. Some of them are intended to be impossible. And we can get the idea that we have to meet some set of demands to be prepared for Jesus. If that's the case, we'll never feel like we're good enough. How can you possibly feel like your heart is ever a good enough spot for the Lord of the universe to live?

What Eugene Peterson did though wasn't about meeting the baby's demands. He was doing it for his own sake, realizing that the act of preparing would change him. And it did. And when we look at our own lives and make room for Jesus, it's not to meet his demands – it's to change our hearts.

When a hotel gets a room ready for a more average guest, it just takes three simple things. For starters, the room needs to be vacant. You can't assign a room to somebody when someone else is already staying there. It's no different with creating spiritual room for Jesus. There needs to be a vacancy in our hearts. If other things are taking up all the room, Christ will be forced to the side.

Second, the new guest needs a room key. You've got to give them access when they check in. The same is true when it comes to Christ.

One of the most famous pieces of Christian art was painted by Holman Hunt in the 1800s. It is based on the verse in Revelation where Jesus says, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in."

The door in the painting is overgrown with weeds and ivy, and there is no handle on the door. Someone asked Holman Hunt if he had forgotten it, and he said, "No. I wanted to show that the door can only be opened from the inside."

Christ never forces his way into our lives. It is up to each one of us to decide whether or not to give him access.

Finally, the room needs to be clean. The sheets need to be changed, the towels need to be replaced and the trash needs to be taken out.

This may seem out of order. Normally, you would clean up before your guest comes. But in reality, we can't clean up our garbage without God's help. Confession means to agree with God about our sin. To be able to say, "Yes that thing I'm doing – it's garbage. It needs to be taken out. That thing in my past – it is not helping me in any way. It is a burden. This anger is ruining me. This thing I'm hiding is exhausting. This bitterness is ugly. It's garbage. And Jesus it's too heavy for me to carry out. I need your help. And when we do that, he promises to forgive and restore and make us whole.

The truth is, we don't have a guest room in our hearts that's good enough or cleaned out enough for Christ. We can never fully be prepared for the miracle of new life that he wants to work in us. And that's okay. If our heart is still a messy stable, Christ will start there and work with us in turning it into a place fit for him to live.

Because let me tell you something: Ultimately, Christmas is NOT about us making room for Jesus – it's about Jesus making room for us. He makes a way where there is no way. His word cracks the ice in our hearts and the warmth spreads out, making more and more room for him to work. And even more, he came to open up God's house for the whole world.

John 14:2-3

In my Father's house are many rooms; if it were not so, I would have told you. I am going there to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

That's why Christ came – to make room for us. There's always room in God's house, not a cave out back, not some spare corner in a stable. Not even a guest room, but our own place to call home forever and ever. All because Jesus entered our world where we couldn't even find him a bed.

What kind of cradle building are you doing in your own life? How much of yourself are you investing in preparing your heart for what Christ wants to do? The best motivation in making room for Jesus is realizing how he has made room for us. And he will continue to make room. And when we reach heaven – praise God – there will be no innkeeper in sight who can ever turn us away.