

IS THERE STILL NO ROOM?

Luke 2:1-20

It is no ordinary morning in Bethlehem. This normally laid back, hardworking, small, rural village is being turned upside down for a few days. The hustle and bustle is beginning a little earlier this morning. Even the little children are awakened by the barking of dogs and the complaints of donkeys pulling overburdened carts. Local shopkeepers are making sure they are stocked a little better. Street merchants are scrambling for the best spots on Bethlehem's few dusty streets.

On this corner right here a potter and a weaver are arguing over whether the pottery or cloth gets the prime spot. Meanwhile, a metal worker is setting out his best selection of tools and implements. Down each street, doors are opening and people are moving, and the sun has yet to crest over the hill on the horizon. Caesar Augustus has done this town's economy a huge favor by issuing a decree that a census be taken of the entire Roman Empire. Rome wants to make sure she is getting all of her taxes. King Herod, the provincial puppet king of Rome, has chosen to fulfill Rome's orders by requiring all males to register in the town of their birth. It's not a bad move, really. The Jews take great pride in their lineage. Requiring them to return to their hometown is a good way to insure the accuracy of the census.

Because of this the population of Bethlehem has swollen to more than twice its normal size. The merchants are salivating at the opportunity to make money. But perhaps the busiest person in town is the inn keeper. The inn is full. Every bed is taken. Every open spot on the floor is occupied. Every available mat and blanket is being put to use. Many other people had to be turned away last night, even one young couple who was expecting a baby any day now.

The inn keeper's wife asks about them at breakfast, but her husband is too busy to be concerned. Soon, the inn's many guests will be rising, and the morning chores still have to get done. Last night's mess has to be cleaned. Bread has to be made. Animals have to be fed. After all, he had done what he could by giving them some space in the stable, free of charge. He assures his wife that he will check in on them while feeding the animals.

Most of those who didn't stay in the inn found room in people's homes and on their roofs. Many still had family and friends in town. The census was the perfect excuse for a family reunion. Throughout Bethlehem people were sitting on mats catching up on the latest news and sharing memories of old times. Big meals are being planned and prepared. If you just look

around from here you can already see many billows of smoke rising into the air as the ovens are fired early to prepare all the extra food.

Despite all the stories and memories being shared there is no denying the real reason why all these people have gathered here. You see, there are other visitors in town. In fact, these visitors are the main reason why the inn is full. They are Roman soldiers. They are here to keep the peace. It is no secret that the Jews are none too happy being under Rome's thumb. The soldiers are here to insure that everything proceeds, and that it does so in an orderly fashion. No unrest. No riots. No rebellion. Just make sure everyone registers and that Rome gets her coins. Nobody is happy with them being here. The soldiers can sense the resentment. They don't miss the looks of disgust, nor the grumblings and whispers when their backs are turned.

And if truth be told, many of them would rather not be here. Palestine was the back waters of the empire. Nobody wanted to be assigned duty here. Away from home. Away from the action. Away from the spotlight. Away from the glory and probably the promotions too. But they are just doing their job, and they have a job to do. They are going to make sure it's done well. The centurion is the pride of Rome. Rome's military is a well oiled machine with a strong chain of command and troop loyalty. They have a reputation to live up to. They have their orders. So, they do their job.

Along with the soldiers also came the Roman government officials. They are not as apparent or as intimidating as the soldiers, but still they convey powerful, but subtle presence. You can tell them by their fine robes, definitely not the clothing of rural, Jewish peasants. Even the way they wear their hair betrays their metropolitan roots. Their faces are not the chiseled features that belong to the locals. They exude the political influence of their positions. You can see them lurking around all the registration tables carefully watching everything. They are here to make sure that the funds continue to flow into Rome's coffers. Sure, the soldiers carry the swords, but it is a single word from the lips of these men that cause those swords to be drawn.

You can also see other figures lurking around the registration tables, just not as close. Their robes are not those of political stature, but of religious piety. They are Pharisees and Sadducees, representatives from the Sanhedrin in Jerusalem, just five miles to the north. They are here to maintain a quiet, but visible opposition to the proceedings. All Jews hate the Romans, but they are especially distasteful to these men. Their deep religious sentiments are greatly offended by Rome's presence. The soldiers, taxation, and government officials represent

everything they find repulsive about pagans and Gentiles. Sure, there is nothing they can do about it now, but they are biding their time. They are certain God will bless their efforts. He will reward their faithfulness, for they obey the law with a strict exactness. They are the epitome of religious perfection. Through their devotion God will provide the means to overcome Rome.

No, it is no ordinary morning in Bethlehem. But it is none of these things that make this morning extraordinary. This town does have a rich history. Jacob's wife, Rachel, died here while giving birth to Benjamin. It was in Bethlehem where Ruth met Boaz, married and raised their family. King David descended from them. King David himself used to shepherd sheep on those hills right there just outside of town. It was just over there where the prophet Samuel anointed David as king. But what has happened here this morning is far more spectacular than all of these things.

Today, here in Bethlehem, God has become flesh. This shouldn't be a surprise, for the prophet Micah prophesied that the Messiah would come from here. But just think of it...God has entered the world as a baby. There is no royal procession. There is no show of force. There is no official announcement at the temple in Jerusalem or in the courts of Rome. In fact, there is none of the plush luxury that should accompany any king, let alone the king of kings, the ruler of the universe.

Only a stable. A dark, musty, smelly stable. The odor of cows, sheep and donkeys hangs heavy. The stink of manure reeks in the air. Cobwebs cling to the ceilings and mice scurry in the shadows. The livestock seems only moderately concerned with their new human roommates. They eat their hay and the whimpers and cries of the baby are often lost in the mooing, baying, and neighing. A more unfitting place of birth could not exist, yet this is the abode of God.

The voice that hurled the stars into space and hung the planets in their places is reduced to the cry of a baby. The lips that commanded the creation of life now must suckle from Mary's breast just to find it. The feet of him for whom the entire earth is a footstool now must be wrapped in swaddling cloths just to stay warm.

This is the most incredible event in all of human history, yet hardly anyone has taken noticed. Only a few lowly shepherds have gathered to welcome the arrival of the king. They watch amazed and perplexed. It was only last night when an angel of heaven gave them the most incredible news. His brilliance was overpowering. Then they witnessed thousands and thousands of angels singing the most beautiful chorus they had ever heard. They had not seen or heard

anything more glorious in all of their lives. They came here like the angel said, but there doesn't seem to be anything very glorious here. Only a barn, animals, hay and a baby in diapers. Where are the officials? Where are the dignitaries? Why here? Why now? What is this that God has done? Yet even as their mind wonder, their hearts are filled with a strange warmth and a sense of worship. This was no ordinary child.

Everyone else in town was busy. They did not notice this extraordinary event. If they would not have been so preoccupied they might have noticed that the slopes outside of town were empty. The sheep usually grazing there and their shepherds were not there.

But if someone did notice, they were too busy to care. The people, like the inn, had no room for Him. They were too busy. Too many things to get done. There were chores to do. Money to be made. Mouths to feed. Orders to follow. Family and friends to see. Influence and power to exert. Religious causes to pursue. There was just no room for a baby born in a barn.

Why did God choose such a humble entrance? Why announce it to mere shepherds, the lowest class of people? Because God came to rescue us, even the lowliest of us. To reach down and help someone up, you have to lower yourself. That is what God was doing. We all know how things done in the halls of political power actually do very little to help those stuck in the gutters and alleys of the streets. If you want to help those in the gutter, someone has to go to the gutter. Likewise, we were stuck in the spiritual gutter, and God knew he couldn't solve our problem from the throne room of heaven. To help the spiritually poor, He would have to go where they were. The shepherds merely illustrated this fact. That no one is too low to miss the love of God.

Jesus gave up what He rightfully deserved— the glory and majesty of heaven— to give us what we by no means deserve— the glory and majesty of heaven. We have heard many stories of people who have gone to the greatest lengths climb up from the bottom to reach the top, but you don't hear about people on the top, going to the greatest lengths to reach the bottom. But that is exactly what God has done. He has gone to the greatest length to reach us at the bottom, so that He could take us to the top. *"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life."*

But do you have room for Him? Are you like the people of Bethlehem...more concerned with family and friends? Are you like the inn keeper and the other merchants... dominated by the demands of your business and career? Are you like the soldiers...just doing your job? Maybe

you are like the Roman officials...in pursuit of money, influence and power. Or perhaps, you are like the religious leaders, too caught up in your religious performance to even notice the one you worship. Are you like any of these, or do you have room for Jesus? Don't be too busy. Don't let the things in your life crowd him out. He came for you.