

## **No Room**

Meditation on Luke 2:1-14

Fourth Sunday in Advent (Christmas Eve morning 2017)

Merritt Island Presbyterian Church

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*In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup> This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup> All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup> Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. <sup>5</sup> He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup> While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup> 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.*

*<sup>8</sup> In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup> Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup> But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup> to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup> This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." <sup>13</sup> And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup> "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!"*

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"Pastor Karen! Pastor Jim!" the children call out from the playground when they see us walking toward them from the parking lot. They anticipate our happy greeting to them and the *Pajama Party Breakfast with Santa* soon to begin.

They line up along the chain link fence, wiggling, giggling and all talking at once.

Do I like their pajamas? I do --very much. I see owls, penguins, Mickey and Minnie Mouse, elves and a miniature Santa suit.

They like my pink, Hello Kitty pajamas, too.

Little Jacob had asked one of the preschool teachers if the Santa that was coming was the real Santa or the fake one. She didn't know how to answer that, she said.

Now he asks me, "Are there gonna be games?"

"I don't know," I answer truthfully, leaning over to give him and the others a hug.

"Go check," he says. It is my cue to exit. I head to the fellowship hall to join preschool staff and volunteers hard at work in the kitchen, flipping pancakes, and frying bacon and eggs.

I had lots of other work to do on the Thursday before Christmas Eve, as does every other member of our church staff. But when Tammy, the preschool director, told me what she was planning, I canceled the usual Thursday morning staff meeting and said, "I'll be there." I encouraged other staff to come, if they had time. Leslie, our church secretary and Praise Band director, came--and, among other things, she washed all the pots and pans! I went to the breakfast knowing that saying, "yes" to one thing means saying, "no" to other good things. I said yes, knowing how easy it is to fill up my schedule, especially at this time of year. But that I must listen for the Spirit to make sure that what I am doing is truly God's desire for me. This is something I am not always good at. I am a work in

progress! I have to ask myself every day--have I made and guarded that sacred space in my heart and life for the things of God? Because, when we give up that sacred space, we lose our peace! This is always a temptation for us--to leave *no room for Him*.

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Luke tells us that the timing of Jesus' birth coincides with a decree from Emperor Augustus that all must return to the hometown of their ancestors to be registered. This decree forces Joseph with his young wife, Mary, to travel 90 grueling miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem in her third trimester of pregnancy.

Augustus, whose great uncle was Julius Caesar, is the first emperor of Rome. Born Gaius Octavius Thurinus in 63 BC, he is a shrewd leader during the tumultuous time following Caesar's assassination in 44 BC. He combines military might, institution building, and lawmaking to become Rome's sole ruler, laying the foundations for what will be called "Pax Romana"--200 years of so-called "Roman Peace." The Roman Senate gives him the title "Augustus," meaning "exalted one," around 26 or 27 BC, at the beginning of his 40-year reign.

It's not a good time for the Jewish people. They struggled against Syrian domination before the rise of the Roman Empire. Now their land is ruled from Syria by a governor, Quirinius, appointed by Rome. The census for "all the world"-- all the Roman Empire--has sinister implications. They aren't just counting people to see how many they are. In ancient times, a census is an inventory of all the wealth in a region--its people, animals, crops--so the

government can tax the people to the maximum. A census will mean *exploitation*. The poor shepherds keeping their flocks at night are now threatened by a greater danger than wolves. The predator is Rome, who will come and take their flocks and call it a “tax.” The campfire talk as they try to stay awake may very well be venting anger, frustration and fear for the darker times to come, as the rich get richer and the poor, poorer still.

Then, suddenly, an angel in a bright light appears. They are terrified, not just because they don’t understand what is happening, but because they are living during an oppressive regime, when bad things happen to anyone who speaks against the government.

But the one who startles them in the dark tells them not to be afraid. The angel brings “good news of great joy” for God’s people. He sends them to go and find the child who is the Savior, the Messiah and Lord. This is the only place in the New Testament we find these 3 titles together. “Savior” from the Hebrew Scriptures, had always meant one whom God sends to liberate Israel. But rulers misuse the term, calling themselves “Savior,” and claiming special power over their subjects. Messiah or “Christ” in the Greek means “anointed one.” The term was used for kings and priests in Israel as a sign of divine approval and authority. By the time of Jesus’ birth, God’s people had begun to hope for one Messiah, sent by God to bring about God’s final reign and Israel’s final victory over all its enemies.

This baby is not the Messiah they expected. The angel calls the child “Lord”--YHWH, the sacred, unpronounceable name of God from the Hebrew Scriptures. This is Emmanuel, God come to us, as one of us. The heavenly hosts --an angelic army-- declare God’s glory and praise. They

leave in Luke 2:15, and the shepherds say to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us."

Funny thing is that Scripture doesn't tell us what happens to their flocks. They couldn't possibly have taken all of the animals with them. Maybe the encounter with angels stirs them to shift their priorities--worry less about the things of this world and think more about the things of God.

They go "with haste" and find Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger.

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On Thursday morning, the children gather in the fellowship hall for a hot, delicious breakfast. I pour maple syrup and watch some of the kids down 2, 3 or more pancakes.

Suddenly, a man in a red and white suit appears.

"Santa!" the children squeal with delight, though some are a little afraid, at first.

One girl assures me, "I'm not scared. I already saw Santa at the mall!" Children begin lining up to talk with him. He asks each one if they want something special for Christmas. A doll. A penguin. Power Ranger toys. He asks them if they say their prayers and encourages them to keep on praying. They nod, "Yes."

He asks each one if they have been good this year. Most say, "Yes," but one little boy looks down silently. A little girl waiting in line bursts out, "No! He hasn't been good!"

I play elf and give out Santa's gifts -- a picture book and a big candy cane. Santa is gracious. Even the little boy who might not have been good receives a present.

One child on Santa's lap says that Santa wrote him a letter.

"He did?" Santa asks, before laughing and correcting himself, "I did?"

One boy with a serious expression asks Santa, "Where's your reindeer?" Santa answers, "Oh, they'll come when I'm ready to go."

After visiting with each child, Santa and I read aloud the picture book, *'Twas the Night Before Christmas*. The children excitedly point to St. Nick and yell, "It's you!!"

The little boy who asked where Santa's reindeer was stands up and points to a picture of the sleigh on a roof. "There's your reindeer," he says.

Afterward, Santa and I visit the babies and toddlers in their classrooms. I am grateful to our Santa for putting on a hot, furry suit, complete with beard, boots, and hat, to bring joy to so many little children. And some adults, too! And I am glad that I went to the Preschool Pajama Party Breakfast, though I could have been doing all sorts of things last Thursday morning. The whole time I was there, I felt God's presence, God's peace. I knew that I was where the Lord wanted me to be.

I have to make room in my heart and life for Him.

Won't you make room for Jesus, too?

Let us pray....

Holy One, we thank you for your good news of great joy to all people, declared by the Heavenly Hosts. Your Son, Christ the Savior, is born! Thank you for sending your Son to take our sins away and to lead us back to you when we had gone astray. Lord, help us to make room in our hearts and lives for serving you every day. Speak so that we may hear your voice. Lead us in your will. Grant us your peace as we seek to obey. Strengthen us with hope that although we may live in dark times, your light has come. Give us courage to share your light so that all the world may see and come to know you. In Christ we pray. Amen.