

Sermon for Christmas Eve—Year C 2018
Home for the Holidays

Christmas is an occasion that brings families together. Surely there is at least someone here tonight wondering how they are going to be able to sleep on that fold-out couch that awaits them.

That bar across the back starts to get really uncomfortable sometime in the middle of the night.

And someone else is wondering how they'll fair on the floor whether in an air mattress or in a sleeping bag.

That's what it likes when families gather, the house overflows with people, and we make room.

Of course you might be a complete curmudgeon like the TV character Ralph Kramden who complained about his mother-in-law's idea of coming for the holidays—

“She arrived on New Year's Day and didn't leave until Christmas!”
Well, I guess we all have our experiences and vision of what it means to be home for the holidays.

In the Palestine of Herod the Great, families looked out for their own.

And extended families could get quite extended in some circumstances.

This is what makes Mary and Joseph's dilemma such a problem, as Luke's gospel tells us that Mary,

“gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger,

because there was no place for them in the inn.”

What were they doing in a stable with no bed for their baby but a manger, which is a polite word for a feed box?

Where was *their* family?

Bethlehem was Joseph's ancestral home.

If Joseph had to go to Bethlehem,

so would have his brother and sisters, father and mother, and his cousins, too, at least whichever of those family members were still alive.

Each of them would have had to have found room in Bethlehem,
and once they found room,
they would have been obligated by duty
to make room for Joseph and his very new,
so obviously pregnant wife, Mary.

So why were Mary and Joseph in a stable?

Perhaps the family had piled into the inn
and Mary and Joseph were living in the overflow section.
That explanation would work, except for Mary's pregnancy.
Even an elderly uncle or an odd second cousin
could have given up a bed for a woman on the verge of childbirth.

Yet Mary and Joseph were in a stable
as there was no room for them in an inn.

The shepherds did not find a stable
overflowing with extended family knocking themselves out
to make some better arrangements for the new baby.

No, the shepherds found a child wrapped in bands of cloth
and lying in a manger.

No mother-in-law, no aunt, no cousins and no sisters-in-law.

Just a very young mother, doing for her baby what she knew to be best,
with the father trying to make things a bit better,
the best he could under the circumstances.

Why this happened is a mystery.

We can guess, as some have,
that it was because Joseph was older,
and Mary was his second wife.

He had no surviving relatives to make room for him and his young bride.
Or we can guess with others that the scandal of Mary's pregnancy
had stretched the limits of family to the point
that the Holy Family was left out
when it came time to sort out sleeping arrangements back in Bethlehem.

But what we know, and know with certainty,
is that Mary and Joseph were left to fend for themselves.
No family had made room for them in Bethlehem.
In a town packed to the rafters with fellow ancestors of King David,
no one could find room for Mary and Joseph,
who had every reason to feel quite alone
as they laid their baby in the manger.
Even John's gospel tells us that Jesus came to what was his own,
and his own people did not accept him.

This Bethlehem scene from the Gospel of Luke
makes the words of Jesus in chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew
all the more poignant:

“I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat;
I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink;
I was a stranger, and you did not invite me in;
naked, and you did not clothe me;
sick, and in prison, and you did not visit me.’

Then they themselves also will answer,
‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty,
or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison,
and did not take care of you?’

Then the king will answer them,
‘Truly I say to you, just as you did it to one of the least of these
who are members of my family, you did it to me.’”

Mary and Joseph were strangers, and no one invited them in.
And those who shut their doors to Joseph
as he looked for room for his great-with-child wife,
were shutting their doors on God incarnate.
When they did not make room for that one pregnant girl,
they did not make room for the maker of heaven and earth
to be born among us.

Yet, the story of Christmas
is a story of good news of great joy for all people,
not just those surrounded by family tonight
in cozy and less than cozy surroundings.
Christmas is exceedingly joyful good news
because in coming to a couple who were themselves lost and left out,
God turned the world upside down.

For the Christmas story did not start
with Mary and Joseph alone in that stable in Bethlehem.
Nor did the Christmas story begin with the angel appearing to Mary,
or even with the prophets who foretold of the event centuries earlier.
The Christmas story began with God looking on creation,
so lovingly made and so needlessly gone astray.
God's bold and daring plan was incarnation,
the Word of God becoming human.
In becoming human, God sided with the oppressed and the outcasts,
and showed it by coming first to poor, lowly and even despised people.

The idea of God becoming human
in lowly circumstances is wondrous,
for it means that God knows us and loves us even as we are,
whether we spend tonight alone
or trying to sleep on a fold-out couch in a house full of extended family.
The miracle of Immanuel, "God with us," is that we see
that though Mary and Joseph may have been forsaken by others,
they were never forgotten by God.
Jesus was raised by Mary and Joseph –
people with nothing but their faith,
and love of God and neighbors to recommend them for the job.
They had no status, no power and no wealth.
The only thing they really had to offer was love.
Having nothing to offer but love
is exactly what the creator of heaven and earth had in mind all along.
That's God's vision of what it means to be home for the holidays.

So we who gather tonight in the warm glow of the light of God's love
should be challenged by this vision of a world
turn right-side-up by a baby in a manger.
For having seen that he who the universe could not contain
may be found in a stable,
and in the bread and wine of communion,
how much better our eyes are to be focused
on seeing our Lord in the people in need all around us.
And it is this vision of the world and of welcome and home
that is indeed good news of great joy for all people.

May every heart prepare him room.