

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
December 24, 2015

God Enters Our Space

Luke 2:1-20

Luke doesn't begin his version of the Christmas story with an opening crawl headed by, "A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . ." No, for Luke, God's involvement in human history, here on this planet, is critical. For Luke, time matters. "In those days. . . ." And who's in power matters. "Caesar Augustus issued a decree. . . ." And space, or geography, matters. "That a census should be taken of the entire Roman world." Date, place, and circumstance. These aren't just minor background features in the story of Jesus' birth. They're actually essential elements in God's saving plan. For even when they don't know it or acknowledge it, emperors, governments, and laws can serve the purposes of God. So Luke starts out by reminding us that Augustus may be in charge of the empire, and within that empire Quirinius may be in charge of Syria, but ultimately, God is in charge of it all. We, and those who govern us, may think of it as our space, but in the larger scheme of things, it's really all part of God's space.

Not that there isn't some distinction between God's kingdom and earthly kingdoms. Later in Luke's story, the army of angels announces, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests" (v. 14). Clearly, the birth of Jesus has everything to do with the relationship between the realm we call heaven and the realm we call earth. As other commentators and writers have put it, we can appropriately think of heaven as God's space, while earth is our space. In some ways, they overlap and interlock. But the main reason for the coming of Jesus is that the relationship between heaven and earth, between God and us, isn't what God intends it to be. Jesus is God's way of fixing that relationship, of setting right what has gone horribly wrong. That's why we open our hymnals and combine our voices to declare, "Hark! The herald angels sing, 'Glory to the newborn King; Peace on earth, and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled.'" God doesn't settle for a buffer zone between himself and hostile humanity. His goal is restoration and peace.

This peace between God and us, and peace among us, happens because God, in the form of Jesus, comes into our space, which in a sense has really been his space all along. We simply haven't been living in it the way that he created us and intended us to. We've been rebellious and disobedient, failing to trust in his sovereign, saving love and faithfulness. Thankfully God, in his mercy, refuses to leave us to ourselves in our space. That's because his ultimate purpose is to dwell with his people in a renewed, restored creation. And the path to that destination leads through a place and a space called Bethlehem.

But as we know from our traditional understanding of the Christmas story, Bethlehem has its own space issues. "There was no room for them in the inn." That single statement has generated countless depictions of Mary and Joseph being turned away from the local Super 8 by a coldhearted, stressed out motel manager. Due to all the people arriving in town to participate in the Roman census, every room is booked. So climb back on your donkey and be on your way. Hopefully you have some relatives in the area who will open their doors to offer you some shelter, food, and rest. At least that's the way the story is often portrayed.

Preacher Thomas Long tells a story about one congregation's portrayal of this scene. Long says:

There was once a Christmas pageant at a small church in which the part of the innkeeper at Bethlehem was played by a high school student. He was a quiet and polite boy, but the kind of boy for whom the word "awkward" was an apt description—awkward in manner, awkward in social relationships, even awkward in size, his growing frame always pushing at the limits of his clothing. His peers liked him well enough, but he was the sort of person who was easy to overlook, to exclude from the center of things. When Joseph and Mary appeared at the inn, he stood . . . awkwardly . . . in the doorway, slumping a bit toward the couple as they made their request for lodging. He then dutifully recited his one line, "There is no room in the inn." But as Mary and Joseph turned and walked wearily away toward the cattle stall where they would spend the night, the boy continued to watch them with eyes filled with compassion. Suddenly responding to a grace which, though not part of the script, filled the moment, he startled himself, the holy couple, and the audience, by calling, "Wait a minute. Don't go. You can have my room."¹

When God comes into our space through Jesus Christ, we face very personal decisions about how we will respond, knowing that welcoming the Savior will have major implications for the way that we arrange our own lives. Indeed, the floor plan of our lives, the behavioral furniture of our day to day existence, will normally have to be renovated and rearranged in order to make room for the Lord to dwell in us. As human beings who are deeply committed to preserving and protecting our space, this is hard and costly.

A teacher in our church's day care ministry once had a student who felt very strongly about guarding his space. Since the classroom didn't include individual desks, the students shared a large table. Nothing bothered this particular student more than having another child violate the invisible borders that he had established. Things eventually got so difficult that the teacher used some tape to mark off the student's space at the table. Whether the children were busy reading, drawing, eating, etc., he wasn't supposed to go outside those boundaries, and no one else was supposed to come across them. For the teacher, it was a tough call, but it did make for a more peaceful and productive learning environment.

That's just one example of how we human beings are determined to secure and defend our space. There are certainly plenty of other similar experiences from daily life. The dinner time call from a telemarketer. Loud music coming from the car beside you while you sit at the traffic light. The fellow commuter who presses up against you while standing in the crowded subway car. The pop-up ad that regularly appears while you're trying to enjoy your favorite website. Your small child who keeps yelling through the door when you're trying to have some "me time" in the bathroom. The friend who unexpectedly reaches over and grabs some of your chips during lunch at school. And how could we not mention the person who has the audacity to sit in your spot in the church pew. Talk about an unholy violation of personal space! I could go on, but you know what I mean. Privacy, buffer zones, and individual territory are top priorities in contemporary life.

In this kind of atmosphere, it can be very hard to share space, or to open up our personal space and welcome others in. That's one of the reasons why our life together as the church, the community of Christ's people, is so important. When we invite others to this Christmas Eve service, or to any of our Sunday gatherings, one of the things we're acknowledging is that this is a public space. Anyone who wants to attend can attend. And in this public space, we go beyond just greeting strangers and welcoming newcomers. We take the time and make the effort to move deeper into Christian fellowship, to cultivate a sense of belonging, and to forge intimate, lasting relationships that reflect the faithfulness

of God. The God who enters our space so that we can share in his space, and participate in his life and glory.

Christmas shows us how spacious God's heart is. I like the way that Pope Benedict XVI put it several years ago in a Christmas Eve message. He said, "Heaven does not belong to the geography of space, but to the geography of the heart. And the heart of God, during the Holy Night, stooped down to the stable: the humility of God is Heaven. And if we approach this humility, then we touch Heaven. Then the Earth too is made new."² No wonder the angels declared, "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests."

Luke says that after that angel-led worship service out in the middle of the fields, the shepherds traveled to the crowded streets of Bethlehem, found the baby and his parents, saw what was happening, and started broadcasting the news. From there, as Luke's story of Jesus and the early church unfolds, we see how word of God's arrival goes beyond the city limits of Bethlehem and into the larger territory of Judea, and eventually spreads to other parts of the empire, ultimately making its way to Rome, the center of power. That's because when God enters our world, he doesn't confine himself to a particular territory, within particular boundaries, behind particular borders. No, his dominion, his reign, is meant for everybody, everywhere.

This is why the church's mission in the world is about entering places and spaces where God has already claimed sovereignty, and wants to implement his loving will. I recently learned of some congregations that did this a few years ago at a place called The Colonial Motel in Fredericksburg, Virginia. Pastor Gregg Jennings wrote about the circumstances that led up to his church's involvement. He says,

In October of 2011, there was a murder at The Colonial Motel. Evidence suggests it was a drug deal gone badly. The Colonial is an ironic and notorious place where women are used in prostitution and where sex-offenders go to transition. Now, by adding murder to its resume, The Colonial Motel sealed its fate as Fredericksburg's finest leper colony, always happy to "leave the light on for you" as long as you're looking for a red one.³

Jennings says that after the murder, he would voice a simple prayer as he walked by the motel on his way to work each day. He prayed, "God, we will take action but you'll have to tell us what to do. We'll file legislation and get petitions to close this place. We'll even pray for lightning to strike. Because things have to change." Jennings says that within a couple of days, God answered the church's prayer with an old familiar incarnational response: "Go to them. Enter their world."

What would that look like, especially during the Advent/Christmas season? Through prayer and preparation, it took the form of Jennings's church, and another congregation, coming together for a service of worship and communion, after which each worshiper grabbed a gift bag for a motel resident. Each bag included homemade cookies, candy, a twenty-five dollar gift card, and handwritten notes of encouragement and hope from church members. They then went out and joined together in prayer on the city street. From there, they went Christmas caroling door to door at the motel, then set up tables in the parking lot for breakfast with the residents. Soon an entire city block was filled with joy and laughter.

Jennings says that one of the most beautiful moments of the morning occurred when a homeless man on a bike, who wasn't even staying at the motel, began texting his friends with the message: "Christmas is here and it's at the Colonial Motel."

Tonight, we remember how God, in Jesus Christ, has come to us and entered our space, our world, with all of our lostness, brokenness, and unrighteousness, to be with us and among us, for our salvation. And how much we truly receive the Savior into our space will be reflected and embodied in the kinds of lives we live, especially in how we ourselves enter the world of those who are broken and forgotten and lost. May the God who is here with us in this space tonight send us forth to be in those spaces and places where the good news of his reign needs to be heard and seen and welcomed.

¹ Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima, Ohio: CSS, 1987) 42-43.

² Benedict XVI's Midnight Mass Homily (December 24, 2007). Accessed December 16, 2015. <<http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/benedict-xvi-s-midnight-mass-homily>>.

³ Gregg Jennings, "The Colonial Inn-Carnation." Fresh Expressions website. December 18, 2012. Accessed December 17, 2015 <<http://freshexpressionsus.org/stories/the-colonial-inn-carnation/>>.