

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
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## **Christmas Hospitality**

Luke 2:1-20

Last Sunday, we opened our service by singing "Mary's Boy Child." Part of it goes like this: "Now Joseph and his wife Mary / Came to Bethlehem that night. / They found no place to bear her Child, / Not a single room was in sight.... By and by they found a little nook / In a stable all forlorn. / And in a manger cold and dark / Mary's little Boy/Child was born."

"A little nook." That's one way of envisioning the modest hospitality shown to Joseph, Mary, and Jesus. These days, "nook" often refers to a small and cozy space, a place of retreat and refuge. During the coronavirus pandemic, I've noticed that lots of people are Zooming from their nook, where they can eliminate or at least minimize background noise and distractions. I imagine Joseph and Mary, with Jesus in her arms, videoconferencing with their relatives back in Nazareth, so they too can see the new arrival.

But as with so many of our glittery and glowing visions of the event, things in Bethlehem were much more austere and harsh. It's not as if Joseph and Mary were going from Motel 6 to Super 8 to Red Roof Inn, only to see the no vacancy sign lit up at each stop. Bethlehem wasn't a major commercial center. It was a tiny little place that probably didn't even show up on most ancient maps. People generally didn't go to Bethlehem to stay. They just passed through on their way to somewhere else.

What's more, hospitality was less a way of business and more a way of life. Welcoming the weary traveler and receiving the stranger was essential to virtuous living. It was part of what God expected and commanded his people to do. So Joseph and Mary weren't stepping into a completely unknown situation. Joseph wouldn't have been turned away from his ancestral home, especially since Mary was pregnant.

And yet, accommodations were tight. The word translated in verse 7 as "inn" is used later in Luke's Gospel to refer to the guest room where Jesus and his disciples shared the Passover meal. This type of guest room, attached to a private home, is probably what Luke has in mind in the story of Jesus' birth as well. If so, Joseph and Mary may very well have been relying on the hospitality of family or friends whose guest room was full. So they may have given Joseph and Mary space in the family room with everyone else, including some animals, or under a covered shelter near the lodging. Whatever the specifics, we read Luke wrongly if we think that Joseph and Mary were just kicked out into the cold, alone and friendless, wandering the streets, with nowhere to go. More than likely, their family helped make sure that they were provided for, one way or another.

In many Latin American countries, especially Mexico, there's a festive ritual called Las Posadas. The word *posada* means "inn" or "lodging." With the Hispanic population growing in the United States, Las Posadas has also expanded into many American congregations and communities. It's celebrated over the nine nights leading up to Christmas Day, representing the nine months that Mary was pregnant. On each night, children and adults join in a procession as pilgrims, simulating the journey that Joseph and Mary took in search of lodging. They go from predesignated home to predesignated home, using song to ask

the series of "innkeepers" for a place to stay. At each stop, their request is denied, except for the last one, where they're welcomed and invited in, and a celebration is held, complete with food, drink, and a piñata.

Like most other Christmas traditions, Las Posadas has felt the impact of COVID-19. Lots of congregations and communities have taken this year's celebration online. I saw one church that had Joseph and Mary going from door to door in the educational wing of the building, trying to find shelter. At each stop, a member of the congregation played the part of the stern innkeeper, waving his hands to turn the couple away, until the final stop, where they were met with welcome arms.

Imagine Mary and Joseph trying to make their journey under coronavirus conditions. Everywhere they turn in Bethlehem, signs read, "No Mask--No Entry." And what a challenge to social distance in a small home where other distant relatives have shown up and need a place to stay. In fact, in his last press conference, King Herod had announced lower limits on indoor gatherings of family and friends. And all this going on in the midst of a census. Remember our country did one this year too.

Hospitality has taken a hard blow during COVID-19. Just ask any of the millions of people who have lost their jobs in the hospitality and leisure industry, which includes hotels, restaurants, entertainment, travel, and recreation. Workers in this sector of our economy have taken the biggest hit in the midst of restrictions and lockdowns. Though there have been small signs of improvement, many hospitality-related businesses have closed for good.

But that's just one form of hospitality. At another level, hospitality has to do with how we keep our hearts, minds, and lives open to others. Technology has given us some ways to do that. Come tomorrow, some of you will be on Zoom, FaceTime, or some other videoconferencing app, participating in a virtual Christmas with family and friends. You may not be able to open your front door to others, but you can at least open a browser window and welcome the presence of loved ones. It's certainly not the same as being together in-person, but at least digital hospitality is an option.

At the same time, practicing hospitality needs to expand beyond our own immediate circle of family and friends, welcoming others who may be largely unknown or perhaps even complete strangers to us. During COVID-19, we've seen all sorts of creative means of making space in our lives for the needs of others. Drive by visits and celebrations with those who are confined and lonely. Food drives and distributions to aid the unemployed. Shopping for supplies or medication for neighbors who are older or whose immune systems are compromised. Musicians sharing songs from their balconies or porches. Quarantine chalk art on driveways and sidewalks. These are just a few examples of how we can stay safe while also staying aware. Aware of human beings, human networks, and human circumstances beyond our own four walls.

And strangely enough, during circumstances like the present, practicing hospitality can also take the form of keeping our distance. I came across one person who pointed out that as followers of Christ, we can actually demonstrate welcome by staying away from others. If Christian hospitality means loving the stranger, then one of the best ways to practice that is by social distancing. In other words, when we take seriously the fact that our choices and behaviors can have profound consequences for other people, some we know and some we may never know or meet, then we'll do our best to love them by limiting the spread of the virus.

Sometimes practicing hospitality in the name of Jesus will mean drawing closer, and sometimes it will mean keeping a safe distance. But in either case, it will always mean

opening a door, literally or figuratively, to make space for others. Pastor Martin Copenhaver, writing about the practice of hospitality in ancient monasteries, says:

The Rule of St. Benedict, written by Saint Benedict of Nursia 1,500 years ago, has instructions for a very specific role in the monastery—the porter in charge of answering the door. The porter’s job is to open the door to the monastery when someone knocks. Not much of a role, you say? Ah, but there’s so much to it. One contemporary Benedictine author notes, “The way we answer doors is the way we deal with the world.”

The porter is given very specific instructions. He is to sleep near the entrance to the monastery so he can hear and respond in a timely way when someone knocks. The porter is to offer a welcome, in Benedict’s words, “with all the gentleness that comes from reverence of God,” and “with the warmth of love.” As soon as anyone knocks, the porter is to reply, “Thanks be to God. Your blessing, please.” He is to say this before he even knows who’s on the other side of the door. And then the porter is to make sure that the other monks know of the presence of a visitor in their midst so that they can join in extending a welcome.

In contrast, the 20th century writer Dorothy Parker used to answer her telephone with this greeting: “What fresh hell is this?” How do you respond when someone knocks on the door of your church or home or life? Is it closer to “What fresh hell is this?” or “Thanks be to God”?<sup>1</sup>

Actually, the basis of our Christian expressions of hospitality is God’s own hospitality. Christmas is about how a holy and loving God comes into the earthly space that we occupy, so that we can enter into the heavenly space that God occupies. Through Jesus Christ, God shows up in our space so that we can be welcomed into his space, and share in his life and glory. And the ways that we practice hospitality toward others are signs of how much we have accepted and experienced God’s hospitality.

Preacher Thomas Long tells a story about one congregation’s portrayal of Joseph and Mary’s search for lodging. He 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.”<sup>2</sup>

During this year when we’ve retreated within our homes for our own well-being and the health of others, I trust that the Lord has been at work opening other kinds of doors, the doors of our hearts and minds, so that we can sacrificially offer space, attention, mercy, and resources to others during this season of suffering, hardship, and loss. May more of Christ dwell in you, so that when others come knocking at your life’s door, you can say, “Yes, there’s room.”

<sup>1</sup> Adapted from Martin B. Copenhaver, *Room to Grow* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015) 95-96.

<sup>2</sup> Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes* (Lima, Ohio: CSS, 1987) 42-43.