

ROOM FOR JESUS

Psalm 89:1-4, 32, OT p. 545
 Luke 1:26-38; Luke 2:1-2, NT p. 56

December 18, 2011
 Fourth Sunday of Advent
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No room. No time in my life for changes like this. That's what Mary might have said. I'm guessing you've said something similar. No time to be sick. No time for a car accident. No time to deal with a computer crash. No room in our lives for all those inconvenient and even scary things that come along.

Sometimes it seems that we don't even have room in our lives for the good things. I must confess, I wondered at first how I would make room in my life for a grandchild. I seem to have managed just fine with that! I talked with someone Thursday at the *Messiah* sing-along who wondered if they could find time in their lives to sing with the Chorale. Many of you do make time to volunteer, but sometimes it's hard to figure out how to make room in our lives for life.

It must have been like that in the first century. Would there be room in Judea and Galilee for Jesus? Survival was top priority for the bottom ninety percent. Life expectancy was very low. Nearly everyone was illiterate. If you owned a small piece of property, you might get by, most of the time, if the crops were good. Day laborers and construction workers like Joseph got whatever work they could. Slaves were almost better off, because they had access to food in their well-to-do master's house. And of course, there was the Roman army to avoid if at all possible. In this very poor land, would there be room for another baby? Who would even notice?

Would there be room in the courts of Herod? You know the story of the wise men who found their way to Jerusalem, asking for the new king of the Jews. Their question didn't sit well with King Herod. He concealed his true feelings from the wise men, but the gospel writer makes it clear B there definitely would not be room in Herod's court in Jerusalem, and he would be sure that there was no welcome in Bethlehem either, for a new king.

Would there be room for a newborn in the lives of Mary and Joseph? Here the question becomes more personal. In that traditional culture, they lived as faithfully as possible to the

expectations of their families, their religion, their God. A baby at this particular time was cause for scandal, not happiness. Joseph decided on as gentle a way as possible to break the engagement, but then, confronted by the message of a dream, had to decide whether he could make room in his life for this child.

The messenger of God came to Mary. Did she have the Lord's permission to decide either way? Or had the decision already been made by God? Luke doesn't say clearly. Yet Mary's question to the angel, "How can this be?" and her final words, "Here am I, servant of the Lord," hint that she had a choice. She made room in her life for Jesus, Son of God, and those who have heard his story have also heard of his mother's commitment to the way of God. She made room.

Is there room for Jesus? Christmas celebrations in Mexico focus on this question of room for Mary and Joseph and the Christ Child. For nine nights, beginning on December 16, the people, especially in traditional homes and rural areas, walk in processions called *las posadas*, with statues of Mary and Joseph, or sometimes two young people dressed as the holy pilgrims, as they search for a room. By pre-arrangement, they are turned away at the first two homes with "No room." At the third, they are welcomed. Once these "innkeepers" open the door, the people come in. Traditionally, they will kneel to pray at a nativity scene in that home, maybe sing some carols, and then have food and a pinata for the children. This happens for eight nights in a row. The ninth evening of *las posadas* is *Buena Noche*, Christmas Eve. The children lead a procession to the church and place a figure of the Christ Child in the nativity scene there. Then everyone attends midnight mass. Christmas is a religious holiday, not a time for presents. Though there are parties, at its core is the question: "Is there room in this home for Jesus?"

Is there room in your life for Jesus? Making room for God takes time. We can set aside time for prayer and spiritual reading, but if we do it just out of habit, or with a bit of resentment because we'd rather be doing something else, I wonder how much it helps us connect with God. We can come to prayer with a heavy heart, and then get discouraged when it seems we are left without answers. Lately, I have found that it is so important just to be quiet and listen and I have trouble with that.

Silence makes room for the Spirit of Christ. Isn't that one of the blessings of Christmas Eve? We don't rush through the service. We patiently wait for the light of one candle to be passed to the next. We have time and space for Christ, the Light of the World.

Making room for God takes commitment. You know the old saying "Half of life is just showing up" and I think there is some real truth there. Being there "at home, at school, at work" helps us to form habits that eventually pay off. Since the earliest days of the church, followers of Jesus have been meeting on the first day of the week, the Lord's Day, to celebrate the resurrection, to pray and read and sing and eat together. If we get out of the habit of being with our church family on Sunday, it becomes much easier to do something else. I know, we don't have to be here to be close to God, but it's a place to start, and I hope what we do together strengthens us for the week ahead.

Part of what we do here is organize ourselves to serve our community, and that also takes commitment. I'm really thankful to be part of a congregation that is so active in so many ways. When we make time in our schedules and room in our hearts for those in need, we are also making room for Christ. After all, he assured his disciples that whatever we do for the least among us, we do it for him.

Mary and Joseph were looking for some simple help. We have people who come knocking on the door of the church, or more likely calling on the phone, in need of help with a water bill or a rental deposit or a prescription. Ruth helps them find other resources, in addition to whatever we can give from our deacons' emergency fund. Other churches do the same. This is time-consuming "ask Ruth about that." But if we make the commitment to serving others, we are expressing our commitment to the work of Christ.

Making room for God might involve your checkbook. The Food Bank can always use more donations of food and money. The Salvation Army uses its donations very wisely. The Presbyterian Joy offering that we'll receive today provides substantial help for pastors' emergency needs and for higher education. I hope we don't downplay the real impact even our small financial gifts can make.

One more way we as Christians might make room. What about the foreigner among us? Mary

and Joseph were far from home. The people of Israel had lived as foreigners in the land, and so the Lord had commanded them to treat the aliens among them as if they were part of the people of God. I caught a bit of a news report about a young man in Portland who committed a minor crime and is likely to be deported because he was born in Mexico, though he has not lived there since his parents brought him to the United States as a very young child. He doesn't know anyone there. Is that what Jesus would want us to do? I don't think so. This is just one example of a major immigration situation in our country that must be addressed. We might wish conditions were different, or that different decisions had been made in the past, but this is where we are. What does the story of Joseph and Mary looking for room say about those among us who are also on the fringes? Perhaps Christ comes to us in the face of the migrant worker, or the child who is here without documents because of a family's need to work or to escape violence in their home village. I hope our leaders are willing to discuss ways to be compassionate toward families, and that they will find creative solutions to our need for workers, while protecting us all from those who are engaged in violent crime. I pray we can find room in our own minds and hearts to consider new ways to welcome the stranger, in whose face we may see Christ.

In this Advent season, let us remember what we have already learned from Orthodox Christians, the seriousness of our spiritual preparation; from Coptic Christians in Ethiopia, the joy of faith that blends with daily life; from Chinese Christians, the faith that persists through times of trouble. And now through our brothers and sisters in Mexico, the importance of making room in our lives for God and for one another. In this last week before the celebration of Christmas, may we remember to make room for Christ.

Let us pray. May we hear your voice, O Christ. May your love be born anew in our hearts, in our homes, in our communities, as we prepare ourselves for you to come among us. Amen.