

The innkeeper's long night

A sermon preached by the Rev'd Robert Bruce Edson in St. John's Episcopal Church, Franklin, Massachusetts, on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2008.

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 place for them in the inn. Luke 2:7

Each time I read the Christmas story, I reflect on various characters in the great drama of redemption. Tonight, in my mind's eye, I see the innkeeper pacing back and forth. Because so many people were coming to Bethlehem to register for the census, he is hoping that someone very prominent will stay at his inn. After all, Bethlehem is the city of David and perhaps an important official will want to stay there. He would like that. And it wouldn't hurt business, either. The innkeeper orders his servants to have everything in good order for an important guest seeking accommodations.

As the evening wears on, the lamps are kept burning and the fire is kept going in anticipation of a very important person. When there is a knock at the door, the innkeeper looks out only to see a weary traveler and his wife who is great with child. The innkeeper tells them that he is booked solid for the night and there are no more rooms available and promptly closes the door. Had they been someone important, he would have given them the room he was reserving for distinguished guests. Again there is a knock on the door and again he opens it. This time the innkeeper tells them impatiently that he is sorry but he is booked solid. Joseph pleads wearily that they had stopped at the temple in Jerusalem earlier and that's why they are delayed in arriving. He asks if there is any place he can recommend that would put them up for the night. It is plain to see that Mary is ready to deliver her child at any moment. They didn't need much, just a place to stay. The innkeeper's face and voice soften and he offers them a place out back that is used as a stable for the animals. They should not expect much in the way of amenities out there. Joseph and Mary thank the innkeeper, grateful to have a place to stay for the night. By now it has grown late and the innkeeper decides to turn in, keeping one ear out for the late arrival of any prominent guests.

Before dawn, from out back, the innkeeper hears the sound of a newborn baby. On his way down to investigate, he hears footsteps on the cobblestones and looks out to see shepherds arriving in great excitement. He wonders what is going on and why this riff raff crowd is coming into the courtyard of his inn. He pushes his way through the crowd and is about to order them all out when he looks down and sees the newborn child. Turning toward the shepherds, he realizes that they are kneeling in awe and wonder. He gathers in close and asks, "Who is this child?"

From that moment on, things are never again the same for the innkeeper. He realizes that the very special guest he had been hoping for has indeed already arrived. After that, he sees to it that everyone is welcome at his inn, no matter who they are. Neither friend nor stranger would ever be turned away. Because God had directly touched his life, this man's life is changed and he is never again the same.

A new born does something to you. When you first see an infant in the crib, you feel helplessly and hopelessly in love not only with the child, but with all humanity, giving you a genuine sense of peace and hope for the future.

In the birth of Christ, we have a rebirth of hope for a better world and a fresh view of our selves. Amidst all the troubling events we read and hear about everyday with Wall Street scandals, people losing their savings, pensions and investments, some forced to live on the streets because of losing their homes that have been foreclosed, innocent victims being killed by gun maniacs and the specter of endless international strife, we can understand the urgency for God to come among us to save us from ourselves.

The birth of Christ is the greatest gift ever given because he is God's gift of hope to us. As Jesus was born in Bethlehem, so Christ is born in each of us. As he grew into the full manhood, so we are brought to maturity to come to grips with the mystery of life. In the birth of Christ, heaven and earth are brought together, the finite with the infinite and the mortal with immortality. In Christ, the distant becomes present and the unapproachable becomes approachable.

What began with this child being born in such humble circumstances results in our being lifted up to new understanding and awareness of God's loving nature. Because God came in the person of Christ, the humble are raised up and the self-centered no longer need act as though the world revolves around them. Because God came as one of us, we are lifted up to our full potential to know the power of the God working in us. Jesus is our finite connection with the infinite God.

Like the innkeeper in the story, we sometimes look in vain for prestigious symbols to bring meaning to our lives only to find that we have been looking for the wrong thing in the wrong place. To know Christ is to see and recognize God's presence in both friend and stranger knocking at our door. To know Christ is to know what it means to respect others and never dismiss anyone as unworthy of respect.

In Christ, each and every one of us is precious in the sight of God. Each time we reach out to someone, if even in some small way, we rekindle the light of Christ within to shine as the brightest star in the night.

I think this must have been what Phillips Brooks had in mind when he penned his immortal lines:

O little town of Bethlehem,
 How still we see thee lie!
 Above thy deep and dreamless sleep
 The silent stars go by;
 Yet in thy dark streets shineth
 The everlasting light;
 The hopes and fears of all the years
 Are met in thee tonight.

Phillips Brooks, 1868

