

# No Room

Luke 2:1-7

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There are many elements of the Christmas story that have become engrained in our minds, particularly if you have spent much time around the church. We know about Mary and Joseph, we know the shepherds came, we know there were men who brought gifts to Jesus, and we know Jesus was placed in a manger because there was no room at the inn.

Because of this statement, many Christmas pageants include a character that isn't actually mentioned in the biblical narrative: an innkeeper. For many people, it stands to reason that if there was an inn and Mary and Joseph knew there was no room for them there, then there must have been an innkeeper who informed them of this situation. It's not a huge leap to assume that there was some sort of innkeeper involved in the Christmas story.

Today, we're going to look at what we can learn from this character we assume was part of the Christmas story, even though his contribution isn't mentioned. I hope we'll discover that even though this person doesn't have a name and isn't even mentioned, their contributions were still significant and instructive for us today.

## Setting

Luke's gospel sets the stage for us, telling us what Mary and Joseph were facing.

At that time the Roman emperor, Augustus, decreed that a census should be taken throughout the Roman Empire. <sup>2</sup> (This was the first census taken when Quirinius was governor of Syria.) <sup>3</sup> All returned to their own ancestral towns to register for this census. <sup>4</sup> And because Joseph was a descendant of King David, he had to go to Bethlehem in Judea, David's ancient home. He traveled there from the village of Nazareth in Galilee. <sup>5</sup> He took with him Mary, to whom he was engaged, who was now expecting a child. (Luke 2:1-5, NLT)

Luke includes several important details that give us some background about what the scene was probably like. He tells us that Joseph was required to return to his ancestral town to be registered for a census.

Censuses were common in the ancient world, and they continue to be common in the modern world. In the United States, we take a census every 10 years. Our modern censuses collect more than just population data, they compile demographic data that helps form the basis of many statistics used in decision-making for the government.

In the ancient world, they were less concerned with creating statistical models on which to base policy decisions, and more concerned with identifying how many people were living in each area. This was important for two reasons. First, it helped to identify those who would be required to serve in the military. For much of the Roman Empire, military

service was compulsory, and the census would ensure that the government knew how many people were supposed to be serving from each area, making sure they didn't miss anyone.

The Jews were exempt from this requirement of military service, but they were not exempt from the other primary motivation for census-taking: taxes. One of the big reasons for requiring a census was to make sure the government knew how much tax they should expect from each region. By counting the people, they would be able to quantify the tax burden of each area, and they would then be able to dispatch tax collectors to ensure they collected at least that much money.

Generally, people were not required to return to their ancestral towns for a census, as they would just be counted where they were currently living. But because of the Jewish people's strong ties to their tribal identities, it is possible that censuses carried out in Jewish territories did require people to go back to their hometown. So, even though Joseph was a resident of Nazareth, his family lineage led back to the town of Bethlehem, and he was required to return to Bethlehem to register for the census.

Typically, women would not have been required to make the trip back alongside their husbands. We don't know if Mary accompanied Joseph because this census required the entire family to return, her advanced pregnancy, her desire to be with Joseph, her desire to escape the gossip mill in Nazareth, or because they understood that the Messiah had been prophesied to be born in the town of Bethlehem. Whatever the case is, we know Mary chose to make this long trip (likely around 85 miles) to Bethlehem.

Luke's gospel also gives us some information that helps us identify when this was. We are told that the census happened at the command of Caesar Augustus. Augustus understood the importance of censuses and ordered several censuses of the empire. Each province would need to perform its own census and report it to Rome. It is unlikely that all these censuses happened at the same time, but Caesar was behind them, and accomplished this during his reign, which lasted from 27 BC to AD 14.

Luke mentions that this was the first census that took place when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Quirinius became the official governor of Syria in AD 6. This creates a problem, because Matthew says the birth of Jesus happened during the reign of Herod the Great, who died in 4 BC. How do we reconcile these things? Quirinius held a well-known census in AD 6, but Luke's wording seems to say this census occurred *before* that well-known one (why would he need to specify it was the first census, if it was the only one?) Many believe that prior to becoming the sole leader of Syria in AD 6, Quirinius may have ruled over Syria alongside another governor. Many believe that Quirinius oversaw an earlier census that would have coincided with the life of Herod the great, which would fit with Luke's description. With all this information taken together, most people place the birth of Jesus in around 4-6 BC.

## Bethlehem

We know the town of Bethlehem from the Christmas story, but we sometimes fail to grasp just how small the town likely was. Some scholars estimate that Bethlehem may have only had a few hundred regular residents at this time. We know that it was seen as small and insignificant based on the prophecy made about it in Micah 5:2.

But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, are only a small village among all the people of Judah. Yet a ruler of Israel whose origins are in the distant past, will come from you on my behalf. (Micah 5:2, NLT)

Bethlehem was known as the City of David because it was David's hometown. Bethlehem would have been where Samuel had anointed him as the next king of Israel. Jerusalem is also called the City of David, but that is because David captured the city and made it the capital city. To avoid confusion, some translations refer to Bethlehem as the "Town" of David instead.

Because Bethlehem was such a small town, it is no surprise that lodging would have been at a premium when many people were required to return for the census. It is also not shocking that Mary and Joseph may have arrived later than others, as they would have likely had to travel slowly, given that Mary was *very* pregnant at this point.

Here's what Luke records happening after their arrival in Bethlehem,

<sup>6</sup> And while they were there, the time came for her baby to be born. <sup>7</sup> She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him snugly in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no lodging available for them. (Luke 2:6-8, NLT)

Luke said that while they were there it was time for her to give birth. Most of us tend to envision the scene like this: Mary and Joseph arrive in the city late at night, looking for a room with Mary in the early stages of labor. In reality, we don't know how long they were in Bethlehem, or at what point in their stay Mary went into labor. Luke simply tells us that while they were in Bethlehem, the time came for her to give birth.

Luke does, however, tell us that the reason they laid Jesus in a manger was because there was no lodging available for them. It is from this verse that we assume the existence of an innkeeper who turned them away. It's a reasonable inference.

Unfortunately, the Bible doesn't tell us anything about this innkeeper. It doesn't tell us whether he ran an inn full-time or whether he was just housing guests for the census. We tend to think of an inn as a hotel, where the innkeeper serves you and does everything to ensure your stay is pleasant. That is likely not the kind of lodging people had available in Bethlehem. Many scholars think that this "inn" was quite primitive. Here's how one scholar describes it,

The accommodation for travellers was most primitive. The eastern khan was like a series of stalls opening off a common courtyard. Travellers brought their own food; all that the innkeeper provided was fodder for the animals and a fire to

cook. The town was crowded and there was no room for Joseph and Mary. So it was in the common courtyard that Mary's child was born.<sup>1</sup>

It's possible that Mary and Joseph never actually encountered an innkeeper, but simply arrived at the place where everyone was staying and discovered there were no stalls left. As such, they made do with what was available to them. The baby Jesus was born in a stable-like environment. There was no bed available, so they used the next best thing, a manger, or feeding trough filled with fresh hay. It was at least a place they could lay the baby where He would be protected from the animals, out of the dirt and manure, and even reasonably warm and comfortable.

Though this was not a fitting place for a king to be born, it was the perfect place for Jesus to be born. Rather than being born in elevated and lofty circumstances, He came to earth humbly, showing himself as the savior of not only the rich and powerful, but the meek, the lowly, and the overlooked.

## Questions

As we read this story we are left with lots of questions, most of which are not answered by the biblical record. Why would the innkeeper not have given up his own bed to this couple clearly in need? If there were others around, why would they not have stepped in to help? Did the others nearby take notice of the shepherds when they arrived? Did the innkeeper offer the stable to them as a gesture of kindness? And what are we supposed to learn from this?

Though the Bible doesn't answer these questions, we can put ourselves in the shoes of those people and ask what might have caused us to act this way. In so doing, we can learn some important lessons.

When we ask why the innkeeper would not give up his own bed for this couple who was obviously in need, it can help to imagine yourself in a similar situation.

Imagine you're an innkeeper in Bethlehem and the town has swollen in size due to all the travelers. The small town now has twice as many (or more) people in it. Everywhere you go, it's crowded, and the people filling the town require you to work much harder than normal to try to provide for everyone. After a few days of this, you would be exhausted and just trying to keep up, wondering when the crowds would leave. Under those circumstances, we can understand turning away a family in need, concluding that we've just got nothing left to give.

We might also ask, if there were others who were staying in the inn, why wouldn't any of them give up their spot to the people who were in dire need? We obviously can't know the answer to that. But don't we often do something similar? Don't we look at people in need and blame them for their plight rather than taking pity on them and offering to

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<sup>1</sup> William Barclay, [\*The Gospel of Luke\*](#), The New Daily Study Bible (Louisville, KY; London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 26.

help? Don't get me wrong, there are times when people need to be allowed to experience the consequences of their decisions, but not every situation is a result of bad decisions (like Mary and Joseph). I wonder if the others staying in the inn that night may have looked at Mary and Joseph and concluded that they simply should have planned better.

It is also possible that everyone was so engrossed in their own lives and struggles that they simply didn't even notice Mary and Joseph. I wonder if the others staying nearby had any concept of what was happening in the stable. It's easy to imagine people who had made similarly grueling trips simply being concerned only about getting some sleep, knowing they had business to attend to and a long return trip to make. We see (and sometimes exhibit) this kind of behavior all the time today.

As much as we might like to see some of these unnamed characters as villains of the Christmas story, the reality is that we may often behave the same way they did. While on the surface it seems ridiculous to us that nobody seemed to notice what happened to Mary and Joseph and nobody seemed to come to their rescue, when we put ourselves in the shoes of the people in Bethlehem that night, we can imagine that we might have behaved in the same way.

## **Conclusion**

In many ways it seems strange to devote a sermon to characters who aren't specifically mentioned in the Bible. But the reality is that even though these characters aren't mentioned and we aren't really given their backstories or motivations, there are still lessons we can learn from them, lessons that become all the more salient in the midst of the Christmas season.

**First, we must guard against becoming “too busy.”** This is easier said than done, because our world is filled with things that demand our attention. Most of us feel pulled in a hundred different directions, and we are distracted by not only different schedules, but devices and apps that demand that we devote our attention to them now. Many of us feel so busy that we are almost paralyzed, because we don't feel like we're actually able to accomplish anything.

The way we combat this tendency to become overcommitted is to be intentional about carving out time to be quiet, to serve, and to worship. Let me challenge you to set aside some time each day to simply sit before the Lord, reading the Bible and talking to God. It doesn't have to be a long time but devote some time specifically to that. During that time, decide that you won't pick up your phone, you won't do other errands, you'll go away from the TV or radio, and you'll work to stay focused on the things of God. Choose to eliminate distractions in favor of making time for the Lord. This will be hard when you first start, but that's because you're out of practice! The more you work at carving out this time, the better you'll get at it—and the more you will crave that time of quiet with the Lord.

**Second, we must learn to see others.** Another side effect of our breakneck pace is that we don't feel like we have time to do anything other than what's on our to-do list. So often, we feel like the tasks before us are so great that we can't really see anything else. This often makes us hard-hearted, cold, and uncompassionate toward others. When we see others struggling, we remind ourselves that no one is helping us, so we feel justified in not helping them. We become so self-centered that we cannot empathize.

The remedy is to work at seeing other people. Make it a practice to start asking yourself, what are they feeling right now? As a society we have become somewhat heartless. We should strive to be people who see the needs of others, and work to alleviate some of their burdens. The surprising side effect of doing this is that it often puts our struggles in perspective. When we take time to see each other, we can be reminded of the blessings we have, rather than focusing on our burdens. Make it a point each day to really see someone, engage with them, and empathize with them. Doing this will help us to stop being so focused on ourselves and soften our hearts toward others.

**Third, we must remember that simple acts of kindness can make a big difference.** We don't know if the innkeeper offered Mary and Joseph the stable to stay in or if he (or his wife) came out to help the young couple. They may have done the best they could given the circumstances—I'd like to think they did. Regardless, we are reminded that when we do what we are able, the Lord can use it to great effect.

You may not feel like you have much to offer in service to the Lord. You may feel like the needs you see are greater than your abilities or resources but remember that you are not the only part of the equation that matters. When we offer to the Lord what we can, we are often surprised by what He does with it.

The temptation is for us to conclude that since we can't do anything big, then we are excused from doing anything. That isn't true. When you see people hurting, talk to them, give them a hug, listen to them. When you see someone struggling, offer what help you can, pray for them, connect them with someone who has skills you don't. There are lots of reasons we can come up with for why we "can't help". There were lots of reasons the innkeeper could have come up with to do the same. I'd like to believe that despite the situation, Mary and Joseph knew the innkeeper was doing everything he could for them, and they were grateful. Maybe they started including him on their Christmas card list each year! Simple acts can communicate great love. So don't believe the lie that you can't do anything—just do something!

While we don't know exactly what each of these people did that night when Jesus was born, we do know what we need to do going forward. But it requires us to look beyond ourselves, to make time for the Lord and for His people, and to do something rather than nothing. We need to learn that lesson so that we don't find ourselves saying we have no room in our lives for the Savior.

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