

# God Makes Room

Luke 2:1-7

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Today is the second Sunday of Advent, and in many traditions each of the four Sundays of Advent explores a different theme of the season: these themes vary, but commonly they are hope, peace, joy, and love. Each of these themes are associated with a candle on the Advent wreath; and so today, Christians around the world light the Peace Candle, which is also known as the Bethlehem Candle, because peace came to all the world through Bethlehem. I'm going to talk about Bethlehem this morning, and Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, because I think we learn something fundamental about God when we reflect on how God chose to arrive in this world. And I'll tell you the point of this sermon up front: God chooses to arrive in places that do not have room.

Our scripture today describes Mary and Joseph's journey to Bethlehem, which is only described in the Gospel of Luke. It's a brief passage, but it tells us a lot about the type of journey that Mary and Joseph were on and the way that Jesus was born. The first thing we're told about this journey is that Mary and Joseph did not choose to be on it. They were living in an occupied territory that was controlled by the Roman Empire. And the imperial government conducted a census, where everyone was required to return to their hometown to register. So Mary and Joseph had to make this journey to Bethlehem, whether they wanted to or not. Their movements were dictated by powerful and distant politicians. They didn't choose to go to Bethlehem; it was chosen for them. Someone else decided where they would be going and when they had to get there.

So Jesus's parents set out from Nazareth to Bethlehem—which, incidentally, is about the distance from Alfred to Rochester. If you have ever had an appointment in Rochester and thought that driving an hour in your car was inconvenient, just imagine learning that you would have to walk there instead! The verses note that Mary was pregnant during this journey, and while we aren't told how pregnant Mary was during their travels, we are told that their forced journey to Bethlehem coincides with the baby's arrival. This journey to Bethlehem would not have been convenient in the best of times, but it was certainly more inconvenient for a pregnant woman to be forced to move.

And, to top it all off, there wasn't room for them when they arrived at their destination—at least not in the sense of a guest room. They had to stay in an area designated for animals. Imagine walking to your appointment in Rochester, getting there after several days of travel, and learning that you'll have to spend the night in the garage! The town of Bethlehem is famous now as the place where the Christ entered the world, but really Bethlehem should be famous as the place that didn't have any room for a tired woman about to give birth.

This is not the way or the place that we would expect God to show up in the world, but this is how Jesus entered human history: he arrived at the end of a journey that was forced and inconvenient. He arrived in a town that didn't have space for him to show up. He arrived in a place and time that did not have room for a little baby—more or less the Son of God—so that we could learn an essential truth about God: which is that God makes room.

If you've been paying attention to religious news, you may have heard that the Christian churches in modern-day Bethlehem have cancelled Christmas celebrations this year. Normally this is an important time for tourists to visit Jesus's birthplace, a time full of celebrations to commemorate this religious event. But this year, Palestinian Christians felt that they could not participate in Christmas celebrations as they witness and grieve the destruction of Gaza. One of these churches in Bethlehem, the Lutheran Christmas Church, has set up their nativity scene within a pile of rubble. So the baby Jesus is laid on top of broken stones and concrete with the other figures of the nativity scene scattered around him. The pastor of this church, when asked about the nativity, said: "If Christ were to be born today, he would be born in Gaza under the rubble of Israeli bombs."

It's a stark image. We do not think of an innocent baby in a war zone when we think of Christmas. We usually think of a mythical "silent night" in ancient Israel and our own warm twinkling lights here in America. But this church in modern-day Bethlehem understands that the story of Jesus's birth is a story about God showing up in the world, and they know—perhaps better than anyone else in the world—that God shows up in places where there is no room.

God makes room. God makes room!

And it means something that the Christ who was born in Bethlehem 2,000 years ago did not arrive as a king or an emperor might arrive, but he came as a friend and as a brother or a sister might come. He stayed on an air mattress in the unfinished basement. He came to walk beside us on the journey that we are on, not to walk beside us on the journey that we wish we were on. He came to the world as it is—boring and violent and overcrowded—so that we cannot think that God only is present in perfect conditions.

I've often heard it taught, and I admit this is a beautiful teaching, that at Christmas we should make room for Jesus in our houses and our hearts. And this is why we decorate trees and show generosity through gifts and relish the company of family and friends. And those are wonderful, wonderful traditions. But—and I say this with the deepest conviction—those beautiful and good places are not the places where Jesus is going to be born, this year or any year.

Because Jesus is born in the places where there is no room for God. He dignifies the hardest and humblest human circumstances with the friendship and solidarity of God. And I wonder if instead of thinking about how we can make room for Jesus, perhaps we should pay attention to the places where Jesus is making room. Jesus makes room at the table that does not have enough money for groceries. Jesus makes room at the doctors office where a terminal diagnosis has been given. Jesus makes room at the place of exhaustion and overwhelm. Jesus makes room where the bomb has gone off.

God doesn't wait for the world to be ready to show up. Instead, God makes room where there is no room, where nobody is ready for God to arrive. There is no situation or suffering in this world where God cannot be born.

Perhaps you are on your own unchosen and inconvenient journey this Advent. Perhaps there are places in your life or in this world that feel too angry or hurt for God to arrive. Know that there is no time that is a bad time for God; no place that is too remote for God to meet you. No house can be too cluttered for God; no mattress has such bad springs that God would not sleep on it. God does not care about the state of the kitchen.

God does not wait to arrive until the house is ready, and the dishes are done, and the kids are in bed: God makes room. God does not need a beautiful church or a tinsel-covered tree. God comes where peace is needed, not where it already thrives. God is born where there is no room for God to be born; in places that we think are not fit for God to be born. God is not put off by inconvenience or by suffering or by poverty. There is no sickness so painful that God cannot be found by the hospital bed, no war so terrorizing that God cannot be seen sitting in the rubble. There is no despair so heavy that God cannot hold it. And even death, which is coming sooner or later for all of us, still must make room for God.

God makes room.

And this Advent, as we see the suffering of the world around us, and the suffering in our own communities and lives, remember that God can make room in any house. And to be a part of the peace that God is working out in this world, lean into the places that seem to have no space for God; for these may be the spaces where God is about to make room.