

The Innkeeper
Christmas Eve
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It is Christmas Eve at last. What needed to be done has been done, and what has not been done can wait on this, the most beautiful and mysterious night of the year. The gifts are wrapped, or at least most of them are. The last run to the grocery store has been made. The only tasks left are to set a snack out for Santa, enjoy a cup of hot chocolate, and listen for the whisperings of peace and hope that come on the wings of silence.

Each of us has our own Christmas Eve traditions. My father, who has been dead for over twenty-five years, never thought we could have Christmas Eve without eating a bowl of oyster stew.

Tonight, we participate in the Christmas Eve ritual that millions around the world hold most dear. We have packed these pews tonight because it would not be Christmas without hearing the soul-stirring story of the night that Jesus was born. We sit with friend and stranger alike and let the wonder of it all wash over us again: how a young man named Joseph was engaged to a woman named Mary, who was found to be with child in the most astonishing way. They went to Bethlehem and there, Mary gave birth to the child and laid him in a manger because there was no room for them in the inn.

What a story. We have heard it so many times, many of us could recite it in our sleep, and yet it is so filled with meaning that if we lived to be 210, we would barely begin to plumb the depths of the mystery of the Word made flesh. The one eternal God, whom earth and heaven adore, is sleeping tonight in a box of straw. Heaven and earth have become one. Why? Because God so loved the world.

In the Sundays leading up to Christmas, we at Morningside have focused on the faces at the manger. Tonight, look with me at the one important character in the Christmas story who simply was not there. The Magi might have raced on their camels across the desert to follow the star they had seen in the eastern sky, but the man who lived at the exact place where the star came to rest was the one who missed the most momentous event in human history. I am speaking, of course, of the innkeeper, the one who said there was no room for the travel weary family who had come to Bethlehem to take part in the census that had been decreed by the Emperor Augustus.

What do we know of the innkeeper? Nothing really, other than he had no rooms to rent that night. I have told some of you before about a Christmas pageant in a church I once served. As was the case last Sunday evening here, children played the parts in the Christmas drama. There were angels with halos made out of coat hangers and tinsel, shepherds in their bathrobes, pint-sized wise men carrying their mother's perfume bottles and jewelry boxes. The moment of highest drama came when the children playing Mary and Joseph knocked on a big brown piece of cardboard that served as the front door of the inn. A sleepy looking boy pulled back the cardboard.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

The little fellow playing Joseph answered, "Yes, sir, you can. We need a place to stay for the night."

"I'm sorry," the first boy said. "All our rooms are taken, but why don't you two come on in and have a drink?"

I had never thought of the innkeeper as being possessed of a malevolent spirit, and that little boy reinforced my inclination to have some kindness and sympathy for the innkeeper, who was not

himself an unsympathetic man. He was simply a realist. He was a fellow trying to get through his days and nights as best he could. Frederick Buechner, the wonderful Christian writer, imagines how the innkeeper might have spoken later in his life about that fateful night:

Do you know what it is like to run a business or to run your own life, for that matter, in their crazy world? It's like being lost in a forest with a million trees and each tree is something else to be done. Is there fresh linen on the bed? Did the children remember to put their coats on? There are a million trees, a million things to worry about. And we worry, until finally we have eyes to see nothing else and everything we see turns into a thing: the sparrow lying in the dust at your feet. Just kick it out of the way. The voices of the children outside your window: a distraction, not life, not the wild miracle of new life being born and growing. And that whispering in the air that comes sudden and soft from nowhere: you forget to listen even to the wind. The night they came, the woman came through the door first, walking in a slow, heavy-footed way. Her husband stood behind her. I can't remember a word they said but it was clear what they wanted. The stars had come out. I remember the stars. I didn't stand up. They were poor, you know. I didn't lie about their being no room at the inn. But, perhaps if there had been, I might have lied. Their kind would have felt more at home in a stable, that's all. I don't mean that unkindly, either. Later that night, when the baby came, I wasn't there. I was lost in the forest somewhere, the unenchanted forest of a million trees. I saw none of it. As for what I heard, just at that moment of the birth when nobody turns into somebody, well I don't know what I heard. All I know is this. You live your whole life waiting for something that is true to come. All of us do. We wait for our destiny, for our joy, for our heart's desire. What can I tell you? When he came, I missed him.

The innkeeper was not an evil man. He just thought he knew what was what and did what he thought he had to do.

Last Sunday night, I saw on television an interview with the mayor of a small town across the bay from New Orleans. He explained how it was that he, the mayor, and the police chief of this little city had decided to turn back the refugees, the evacuees from Katrina, mostly elderly, many mothers and their babies in strollers. "We had to do it," the mayor said. "There could have been looters mixed in among them, you know. And after all, we have to take care of our own." I am afraid if Jesus showed up at the mayor's door, the mayor would miss him, and unlike the innkeeper, would never regret it.

Sometimes I worry that we might miss him, too, our whole society. We talked a lot in 2005 about putting Christ back in Christmas, but it is not saying his name that matters. What matters is following Christ's way of compassion and respect for human dignity.

There is a beautiful little legend that picks up the story of the innkeeper where the Bible leaves off. It seems that as the baby grew, one day his mother took him to the market and the innkeeper saw him and looked into his eyes. And even though the baby was still in his mother's arms and could not speak, when the innkeeper looked at the baby, he saw the eyes of all the children throughout all the ages. From that moment on, he pledged to do all in his power to make sure that no child or mother or father or family or human being would ever be unwelcome anywhere. I like to think that the innkeeper's dream and his commitment to it have continued up to and including this very day. Perhaps you and I are of the house and lineage of the innkeeper, for whoever comes to care about the needs of the least of these, about the left out and the outcast, it is as if they are caring about Christ himself. Looking into the eyes of the baby, the innkeeper received the one message that changed his life. How easily we become wrapped up in our own needs, our own agendas. I hope that if the Lord were to show up at our door, we would not send him away.

I also hope that we can make room for the love, comfort, and peace he comes to give to us, tonight. Many of you who are here, I do not know. I do know that some of you have come with a heart full of grief. You have lost someone that you have loved dearly. I do know that some of you are struggling with disappointments about the past. Others of you have anxiety about what tomorrow may bring. Will I be able to pay my bills? What will the doctor say? Will he love me? Will I be forgiven? Did I pass? Why can't I stop? There are a million trees in the unenchanted forest of our worries, but there is nothing to worry about tonight. Tonight is the time to listen for

the whispering in the air that comes suddenly and softly out of nowhere. Tonight is the time to look in the eyes of the infant Jesus and to see the one message he has for you that might change your life forever.

There once was a Christmas pageant in a small church. In this one, the parts were played by teenagers. The fellow who played the innkeeper was an awkward young man, not one comfortable at all being in the spotlight. When Mary and Joseph appeared at his door, he spoke his one line very quickly, "There is no room for you in the inn." But as Mary and Joseph turned and walked wearily away, the innkeeper became suddenly transformed, "Wait a minute," he called out to them. "Don't go. You can have my room." (Thomas G. Long, *Shepherds and Bathrobes*)

It's Christmas, everyone. Please make room in your heart for the savior who is Christ the Lord.