

Hey: Well, it is an honor and a great joy to experience my first Christmas Eve with you as a church community and I am so very fortunate to be playing a role in one of tonight's services. This being the family service where we have designed this at a time where you could still travel and make it to a family engagement this evening I was led to a certain few verses of scripture that I want to dialogue with.

Look: The core set of scripture that I want to focus on today comes to us from the Luke 2: 5-7. It says this, "He (speaking about Joseph) went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. 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." There was no place for them at the inn. That's our focus for today.

Perhaps it's my imagination but I like to think of the moments outside of scripture and envision what they could be. I often chalk this imaginative process to a contextual study. When I hear this familiar Christmas story of Mary, Joseph, the wise men and the rest. I wonder what Mary and Joseph said to one another after everyone left. Did the shepherds go back to work that night? The wisemen? Where did they stay? I mean the inn was full and that was quite a journey. Or were they one of the rooms that Mary could have used? Because for Mary and Joseph that night was chaos, walking, no room at the inn, visitors, angels, stars, the rest. But I like to think amidst all of the chaos when they saw Jesus, really saw Jesus after everyone left and their new, oddly made family was close together, observing his freckles, his tiny hands, the curls of his hair and more it was at that moment they found peace for the first time, it was then that they finally experienced what we believe to have been a "silent night."

We don't have angels appearing in our dreams now a days, and we don't have a problem with inns being full because there is another one or twenty down the road; but we still have full inns. They just don't look like brick and mortar. They look like schedules, calendars, progress, take out dinners, efficiency. Who in your life have you rejected from your inn because you are too full?

When I tell people I'm in seminary, married and work at the church I'm often greeted with "golly gee how do you manage to squeeze that all in?" I smile and

say “oh it just happens.” But in the means of “it” happening those other two letters I've omitted happen too. (haha) It's the nights I come home to my wife already asleep with a simple kiss on the forehead whispering “I'll see you soon, love. It won't always be like this.” Or it's a late or skipped paper. Or an email I forgot to send. By the way; when's the last time I called my dad? Oh wow, been a week. I should pencil that in soon. But that means delayed work, late papers, or another solitary night with only a good night kiss. My inn is full. And as much as I feel validated by my business, the people who need me most are being pushed to the stable. The innkeeper could have given similar excuses like “come back again, it's not always like this” but that likely meant very little for Mary and Joseph who needed he or she in that given moment. What I want you to know is that an inn at full capacity leaves no room for the growth of love for those needing a room in your heart.

Yes God can work amazing things in a stable, God can work in all situations hallelujah, amen, praise Jesus, but in those isolated conversations untold in scripture I imagine Joseph and Mary still wished for a warmer and more comfortable bed for their child that night and as humbling as it is that the King of all kings was born in a stable I believe that God could still have used Jesus if he were born in a place of dignity and yet love conquers all adversity and the “family” gathering at the stable is preserved in our hearts and memories forever.

Why is that nativity scene so significant? So memorable? And further questioning leads me to ask “why did these people even need to be there?” Couldn't God have just shown up at age 30 to John the baptist like in the other gospels? I can't help but think that the Nativity scene was so important because it showed that God's people are to be in community, and God's people include all people, fortunate and meak alike.

Additionally, the nativity is a wonderful reflection of our own families. You have the wealthy wise men with the most elaborate gifts, you know the grandmas that fight to have the better gift than the other one. Or was that just my grandma growing up? (haha) the shepherds who bring their presence and their flock and the nervous new parents, the joy of children on the special day. I don't think the nativity scene would be as profound if a single one of those characters was missing. Is that not true our own family parties? It certainly becomes all the more true the first year someone is missing from the family table. Some of you in here

might be experiencing that this year and if so my prayers, my love and sympathy goes with you.

So what then is the whisper of Christmas? As our videos have demonstrated for you, we cannot find God when our lives are living in the chaos. When we are consumed by work, the consumerism of the season, the constant allure of the efficiency of looking ahead to the next thing.

I imagine that the large majority of you will be traveling to families houses this evening or tomorrow for the holiday celebrations. My prayer for you is be the modern nativity. See the people who are at your table. I mean truly see them. Small talk everyone sure (how's business, how're the kids?etc.), but invest into the life of one or two of the people there. Be the gift of presence and interest that the wisemen and the shepherds were for Mary, Joseph, and Jesus.

But you can't do that if the inn is full. Whatever stresses are on your mind, whatever anger or fears are capturing your heart this holiday season don't let them completely fill your inn up. Because I know there is someone in your life that needs you more than whatever that is.

Further, don't let regrets push out people you cherish and love who need you right now too. Maybe it's an estranged family member, or maybe it's God. Maybe you believe you've messed up too much to ever come back, maybe being in church today is a big step. It's a step I'm proud of. In a few moments we are going to be doing the all favorite tradition of candle light illuminating our sanctuary and singing Silent night, but without your candle the sanctuary wouldn't be as bright as it will be then. You belong here. Regardless of who you are, what you believe, who you have been hurt by, who you have hurt, that addictions you can't break no matter how hard you have tried. Your light makes this sanctuary brighter. Your light casts out the darkness. You matter to us. You matter to God. Look up and perhaps you will see the star that has brought you here tonight, and I hope in the silence of candlelight in this chaotic time of the year that you hear the whisper of Christmas of God saying to you: welcome home, my beloved.

Let us pray: