

### **Luke 2:1-7**

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He 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.

### **“What Was the Innkeeper Thinking?” Rev. Charles Schuster December 6, 2009**

I did want to announce the sad announcement that Kay Mutti died this past week. Many of you know her, and her services will be held here in the sanctuary in January, I think the 9<sup>th</sup>, but we'll have more details on that. Kay Mutti, longtime member of our church.

Somewhere in Northern Colorado it will happen, there will be a long line at the Post Office, and there will be people with packages trying to overnight mail to get Christmas somewhere else on time. The deadline will have passed, but maybe there's a chance, and a woman or a man being tugged at or pulled about by children, who by now are bored with this pointless exercise, as the line inches its way. There is the inevitable face-to-face conversation, standing like the plaintiff at a murder trial, in front of a postal clerk almost postal. "Can you get this package to Phoenix on time?" "I can, but it will cost you forty-seven dollars and forty-five cents." "That's more than I thought. It's more than what I bought. But I've got to do it. It's a present for my father. It has to be there by Christmas, because Christmas is also his birthday." And the postal clerk looks out at no-one in particular and says, "Jesus, that's terrible. I'm glad I don't know anyone born at Christmas." That would be tough. Christmas packages, birthday presents, "Glad I don't know anyone born at Christmas."

Sometimes the best way to understand a truth is to step back from it and take a look at it from a different point of view. Sometimes the people located on the outer edge of the story have more to tell us about the tale than others, or than we'll ever see. The problem is, we don't know much about those people, and there are spaces to fill in, which is what I'd like to do. Today, I want to fill in some spaces. I want to take what we know and apply it to what we're not sure of. For example, let's think about that most interesting of characters in the Christmas story. He's there, but he's not really there. It just says, "While they were in Bethlehem, Mary gave birth to her firstborn, wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." That's all it says.

It seems like if there is an inn, there has to be an innkeeper. Motels are not self-service. Somebody's got to check you in and check you out. I remember one time we were

coming back to Colorado from Texas, and we were going to spend the night in Raton, New Mexico, and the innkeeper was a crusty character, and I said to her, "I need a room for tonight" and she said, "I've got one room." I said, "It's for me and my wife," and she said, "Mister, I don't need a picture of your family tree." And I said, "Okay, but I'd like to see the room before I pay for it." She said, "Mister, I'm not in real estate. Do you want the room or don't you?" The innkeeper. John Piper describes the innkeeper, he'd rise up early and stay up late to help the pilgrims come and go, and when the place was full, to some, especially the poorest, he'd say, "I'm sorry, there's no room. But stay now, out back there's lots of hay and extra cots that you could use. There'll be no charge. It always comes out the same, and I think this part is what it was. The innkeeper, not a villain in the story, but a hero, giving what he had because of who he was, doing what he did because it was the thing to do.

When a preacher in the Children's Sermon asked the kids a question, "Why was Jesus born in Bethlehem?" one kid raised her hand and said, "Because his mother was there." The innkeeper saw the woman and the man and the firstborn child, the wood of the cradle, the innkeeper who had no name. "There's no room in the inn, but there's a cave back behind where the animals live, and a cradle in a stable," the innkeeper would tell us, if we would ask, "I saw them that night when the town was full and people were heavy with burdens, broken down with problems they could not name, or if they could, they would not say. I saw them there, a pathetic couple, their firstborn, in my stable, and the cradle with the straw, and if you ask me why I did it, I can only say the wisdom of the ages said I must, and it was done. A firstborn needs a place, and so I gave him one. If you see someone who is thirsty, you give them a drink, or if you see someone who's hungry, you give them some food, or if you see someone naked, you give them the shirt off your back, and if you see a couple without a place to stay and you got a place, you give it to them. The bird does not sing because it has an answer, it sings because it has a song. An apple tree without an apple's just a tree, you know. An inn with a place to stay with people who need a place, why, Bonhoeffer said it, "In ordinary life, we hardly realize that we receive a great deal more when we give, and it's only with gratitude that life becomes rich." The innkeeper saw the family, the wood of the cradle.

Now I don't doubt there were many innkeepers in Bethlehem that night, when we are told Mary and Joseph in the story that they came to town. The one we mention, was he the one who gave the Holy Family a place to stay, or was it just another wayward couple on the road? I don't know. But this week there was a flight across the country, an airplane landed in Denver, it wasn't supposed to land in Denver, but it did. A woman needed help. She had a baby on the plane. She had a baby, it was her firstborn, was that a special child? The doctor on the plane thought so, the two nurses who were there and helped, they thought so, and so did the mother. Was that child, born that night, the firstborn child of Mary and Joseph? Did that innkeeper provide a place to save our Savior on Christmas night?

I'm reminded of the story of Hank Aaron, who was checking into a hotel and the clerk told him there was only one room, it was small, and it overlooked the alley where there were the trash dumps, and as Hank was signing the credit card slip, the clerk realized who

it was, that he had one of baseball's greatest players of all time, giving him the smallest room he had, said, "Let me change that for you, Mr. Aaron. I didn't realize you were somebody." And Hank looked at the clerk and said, "Everybody's somebody, don't you know?" And Jesus said, "If you do it for the least of these, you've done it unto me." The innkeeper in Bethlehem, if it was Jesus or if it were not Jesus, it doesn't matter, the cradle, the firstborn, there is no room in the inn but a stable out back. He saved the Savior a place, the firstborn.

The centurion at the foot of the cross, the Roman general, Mark tells us, at the foot of the cross, the thieves on either side, one of them saying, "Jesus, remember me when you get into your kingdom." And then those words from the cross, "Take care of my mother. My God, my God, why have you forsaken me. Let this cup pass. Not my will, but thy will be done. It is finished." You know the words from the cross. The centurion looked up, and Jesus looked down. The wood of the cross. And the centurion saw something. You see it in Mark's gospel, the centurion said "Surely this man is a son of God." He admired him. He admired him. Steve Goodyear tells the story about a man who was learning to skydive, it was his first jump and the parachute didn't open, neither did the auxiliary chute. He was out of choices, but he spotted something coming up as he was going down, and when he saw it was a person going upward bound, he yelled, "Do you know anything about parachutes?" and the other person replied, "No, do you know anything about gas stoves?"

The centurion was on his way up, private first class, sergeant, corporal, major centurion. Jesus was on his way down, on the cross. The centurion saw something he admired. It wouldn't be like a friend who stopped by a cop who said to the officer, "Please don't give me a ticket, I'm just a poor preacher" and the police officer said "I know, I know, I heard you preach last Sunday." Or James Moore, who was to give a sermon on Memorial Day, at the cemetery in Houston, and the man coordinating the event said to Jim, "Now you speak first, and then the firing squad will come after you." The centurion admired Christ on the cross, maybe he heard him preach. He was not a poor preacher, he was great. Albert Einstein admired Jesus. No one who reads the gospels can not notice the feeling, the actual presence of Jesus. His personality pulsates with such life. No myth is filled with such. Ann LaMott admired Jesus. She said, "Jesus is all I'm really sure of." There's something to be admired about a man who would talk about turning the other cheek when attacked, and then would actually do it. Something to be admired about someone who would preach a gospel of love and forgiveness, and be able to forgive the enemy, and pray for those who persecute him. It's all about the cross, which by the way, you might want to notice, the cross in the sanctuary that we've been fiddling with it a little bit, it's different than it was. We made some changes. So did Jesus. He died on the cross, the wood of the cross, it shone with the love of God, and the centurion saw it, and he said, "This man is the son of God." He admired Jesus. The innkeeper saw the cradle, the firstborn, the centurion saw the cross.

But there was a third figure. He has no name, simply identified as a man who carried a jar of water. Owned a large room, he let them use it. It's where they ate the Passover meal,

we're told. Christ at the table, the wood of the table, the crown. They made him an offer he couldn't refuse. Let us use the upper room. Christ would like it.

A salesman called a home trying to persuade this couple to buy a freezer. "If you buy this from me, you could save enough on food bills to pay for it." She said to him, "Mister, we're buying a car on the bus far we're saving, and we're paying for a washer on the laundry bills we're saving, and we bought a house on the rent that we're saving. To tell you the truth, we just can't afford to save any more right now." The upper room. On the table there was a crown. Because of it people were saved. Saved from a life of self-indulgence to a life of serving. Saved from a life of empty consuming to a life where everything adds up and everything counts. Saved from a life of thinking nothing matters, but the bottom line, to a life where every one matters, no matter how long the line, where the crown is not for beauty, but for the beautiful who give to causes that make a difference. It could be an upper room where you could see it, or a soup kitchen where it appears. It could be a banquet fit for a king or queen, or where royal figures give banquets and all are invited. It could be where the church's greatest hour is the bell choir, and a change ring, or the house that we built and the wonderful family who will have a place to call their own. We can buy our way out of debt, or save our money and move into it. We can give until we're spent, or we can spend until we have more to give.

Mary Ella Chase was right when she said "Christmas is not a date on the calendar, it's a state of mind." and there was a crown on the table and each one saw it, and Christ let each one wear it, in a way. He was the King of Kings, and he passed the crown to each person, and at the end of the meal, the owner of the room got to wear it, and so do we. You see, the upper room was only one table, but there were other tables like ours today. And when Christ took the bread and the cup and he gave it to the disciples and he said, "This is my body, take it and eat, this my blood, take it and drink, a symbol of who I am, just know that I am in you, and you are in me, and when I'm gone you must meet at the table and you must pick up my crown." The upper room owner saw it, and so do we. It's what Augustine meant when he said, "You are the body of Christ," and that is to say that in you and through you, the work of the Incarnation has to go forward. It's like Kenneth Shamblin meant when he spoke of conversion. He said conversion is movement from "that belongs to me" to "I belong to that." The upper room owner carried his water, and so do we. We are not just admirers of Jesus, we're bearers of Christ. We do not just follow him like a shepherd, but we live as the shepherd and our lives are given to lost sheep who might need us. We wear his crown. It's born of humility, it's a call to service, it's joined with others as the body of Christ in the world and it re-forms at the table. The innkeeper said nothing in the story, but without the innkeeper there would have been no sacrament.

Somewhere in northern Colorado, a long line at the post office, and people with packages, the deadline is past, and she said to the postal, "Can you get this package to Phoenix on time? It has to be there at Christmas. It's a present for my father, for Christmas is his birthday." And the postal clerk replied, "Jesus, that's terrible. I'm glad I don't know anyone born on Christmas." And then from the back of the line, an innkeeper who saw the firstborn in the crib or the centurion who saw Jesus on the cross or the upper

room owner, who saw Christ in the crown of communion, from the back of the line, voices including ours, saying, "So glad we know someone born on Christmas. Someone born on Christmas."