

December 13, 2009

The Quiet Ones of Christmas: The Innkeeper Luke 2:1-7

I've always felt sorry for the wolf. Think of Little Red Riding Hood: who's the bad guy? Peter and the Wolf: who's the bad guy? The Three Little Pigs: who's the bad guy? Of course wolves are dangerous animals and all that - but so are bears (yet we have teddy bears!) and lions and tigers (but we have Tigger and Aslan and such).

And I feel sorry for the innkeeper in this story. In every play I've seen, he's the bad guy, turning Mary and Joseph away with a terse, "No Room." Maybe some kids love to play the villain, but I wonder if we emotionally scar some dear children by giving them the role of the one who has to say "No" to Mary, Joseph and (in reality) Jesus.

Let's take another look at the innkeeper. What does he actually say? Is there even an innkeeper in the story? Jesus was born in a barn or cave used as a stable for keeping animals because *"there was no room at the inn."* No mention of an innkeeper.

I will concede that since there apparently is an inn in Bethlehem, we can assume there must also be an innkeeper. But we still are left asking, "What did he say?" We typically portray him as rather hard, uncaring, and without compassion. How could he turn a couple, 9 months pregnant away?

But let's do a bit of detective work and look at the evidence ...

The Innkeeper did something good

When we lived in Edmonton we would do the drive to Vancouver (to visit my folks) in one day. On a particularly memorable trip, one of the kids cried incessantly. In Blue River, BC - on the verge of parental insanity - we stopped and begged at every motel for a place to stay. There was no room at any inn (what could the innkeepers do)? One motel did have a rough and ready spare room with moveable cots they used for staff needing to sleep over. It was no better than a cupboard with folding cots. But it was space. We were grateful to the innkeeper who could do something - anything - for us!

Mary and Joseph arrive in Bethlehem, quite possibly on the verge of expectant-parental-anxiety, which may have felt like insanity! They stop and beg at the inn for a place to stay. But there is no room at the inn; all of the guest rooms are full. What do we expect the innkeeper to do for Mary and Joseph, realistically? But it looks like he did do something - this stable was possibly associated with the inn (where guests' animals - donkeys, etc. could

be kept). It may be no better than the miserable cupboard we had in Blue River, but it is a sheltered, warm place to stay. It is, literally, a godsend!

No, this stable is certainly not a hospital or a fancy hotel, but it sure is a lot better than an alley or an open field. This stable, modest though it is, makes all the difference in the world to Mary, Joseph, and Jesus ...

Have you ever had an innkeeper in your life? Someone who provided a bit of help - maybe only just enough help - but just the right help - in a moment of crisis?

Have you ever been an innkeeper? There are people in our world who have needs as significant as Mary and Joseph's. Like this little family, they have real issues. We cannot possibly provide every hungry child with adequate food. We cannot provide safe drinking water for the millions of people around the world who need it. We cannot provide housing for every homeless person. But perhaps, like the innkeepers in Bethlehem or Blue River, we can do a little bit for someone - a little bit that can make a huge difference.

What can you do this Christmas to make a difference?

At a global scale, Canadian Baptist Ministries "Hopeful gifts for Change" are a great alternative for the person who has everything. At one level, a goat or a cow isn't much ... but it's something ...

At a more personal level, check out www.adventconspiracy.org and www.rethinkingchristmas.com. Some to think about:

- Photo Organization Box: *"My mother in-law has boxes and boxes of photos (in no order, nor in albums - just thrown in boxes). We purchased a photo organization box for around \$20 and we'll be giving her a gift certificate for our time to help her organize the photos. Not only will it be productive, but an activity where we can reminisce about the past and spend time with my mother in-law."*
- Homemade gifts: Make homemade fudge, cookies - even fruitcake - with love.
- Give the gift of time: commit to spend time together - sharing skills or just being together.
- Make a family recipe book or a CD of favourite songs.

What I find fascinating about many of these alternatives is that they do not cost much money, but they do cost time! Time is more precious to some of us than money. But money cannot buy the love we want to communicate. In our culture, if you want to do something significant like the innkeeper did, give your time ... A more (financially) expensive gift is not going to communicate love (despite what the jewellery store ads like to tell you) as much as time may ...

God did something better

God brought something beautiful out of that stable. He brought a new baby into world. He brought a Saviour into the world. Who would have ever imagined that anything good could have come out of the horrendous experiences Mary and Joseph went through? Yet the best thing this world has ever known, happened right there. The innkeepers little act of kindness became the greatest gift the world has ever known.

God has a habit of bringing great blessings out of difficult situations. He has a way of multiplying our little kindness into much bigger miracles. A pastor who suffers from chronic pain writes this: *"Last year I was one of several speakers sharing my spiritual story at a year-end banquet. The person who spoke before I did talked about a painful condition he had had. He had prayed, 'in faith' (he emphasized this phrase several times) and now his pain was gone. His message was on how to pray 'in faith.' 'If you have enough faith, and pray,' he triumphantly proclaimed, 'God will heal!' His experience led him to present a cause-and-effect formula. If you are in need, pray. If you have enough faith, God will act. Guaranteed.*

"I spoke next. I had not been healed. I spoke of my roller-coaster journey of faith. And I emphasized that though God had not healed me, I had found his Spirit sustaining me, I had grown deeper in my faith, and I had developed a more profound daily dependence upon God. My pain has been instrumental in my spiritual growth.

"After dinner, the other pastor spoke to me. 'How can you be a pastor?' he asked. 'You don't have faith.' In his cause-and-effect world, my experience did not make sense.

"That evening still haunts me. Was he correct? As I thought and prayed, I felt an affirmation that God was still calling me to pastoral ministry. I was reassured that I had genuine faith. But my journey has been different than my friend's.

"God, I believe, deals with us individually. For some, faith manifests itself in healing. For others, God asks us to be faithful by walking through the valley of the shadows. That faithful walking, day-in, day-out, is real faith, too. I have needed tremendous faith to walk, hour by hour, with the pain.

"By walking with pain, every minute, I am forced to be faithful. Every day I am forced to depend on God's grace and mercy. This pain has become one of God's most effective tools to keep me close and faithful to Him.

"If God were to heal me this instant, would I rejoice? Absolutely! I look forward, eagerly, to someday enjoying a pain free existence. But if God chooses to tarry, allowing me bear this pain throughout this life, can I see His blessing? Yes. The lessons I have learned, the

opportunities for ministry that have come, the growing maturity I have experienced have been blessings to me and those around me."

God knows what He is doing. He knew what He was doing in Mary and Joseph's life. Did they know it would all work out? No. But it did. Last week we cited the verse, "*God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them*" (Romans 8:28). And we noted that, in context, it does not promise an easy time - in fact it concludes a discussion about hardship, suffering, and patient hopeful waiting for salvation from the Lord. In the tough times, God gets us through.

Right after that, Paul writes: "*What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? Since he did not spare even his own Son but gave him up for us all, won't he also give us everything else? Who dares accuse us whom God has chosen for his own? No one - for God himself has given us right standing with himself. Who then will condemn us? No one - for Christ Jesus died for us and was raised to life for us, and he is sitting in the place of honour at God's right hand, pleading for us.*

"Can anything ever separate us from Christ's love? Does it mean he no longer loves us if we have trouble or calamity, or are persecuted, or hungry, or destitute, or in danger, or threatened with death? ... No, despite all these things, overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.

"And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow - not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below - indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:31-39)

This is one of those passages you need to memorize - or write out and stick on your fridge - or at least know where to find it in the Bible.

When you're stuck in Blue River - or wherever you might be - know that God is with you. He is up to something bigger and better than you can imagine.

Do something good this Christmas - perhaps you can give your time. Look for God to do even better things ... like bringing new life, new hope, new joy, and love in surprising places.

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