

“A Place in this World”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2007  
Scripture: Luke 2:1-20

Finally, we are here. The little ones are now fast asleep. Dinner has been served and dishes have been done (or can wait until tomorrow). The presents yet to be opened are wrapped and under the tree. And so we take a deep breath, and for once are filled with silence and peace. And we come to church and relax with the smell of pine and the soft glow of the lights on the trees. We make our way here, late at night, to hear again a familiar story. And in the cadence of Luke’s gospel with the oddly-named characters, we hear a beautiful story of God risking everything to be with us, being born as a helpless infant. And so we come, and now that we are here, we can relax, and allow our imaginations to run with the shepherds and bend low with the kings and open the curtain to a manger scene.

The story begins with high intrigue and a roll call of powerful people. A decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. Emperor Augustus, the ruler of the mighty Roman Empire. With the stroke of his pen or the utterance of his mouth, Augustus, sitting on the throne in Rome started things off. This census was taken, Luke tells us, while Quirinius was governor of Syria – a large Roman administrative province that included Galilee and Judea. And all had to go to their own home towns to be registered. And then we hear of a man named Joseph, who set off from Nazareth to the city of David called Bethlehem, for he was a distant ancestor of the mighty king David, who ruled over Israel during a golden era when no foreign empire could order the people around.

Emperor Augustus, the most powerful man in the world. The governor Quirinius, in charge of executing the orders of the Empire in a far-flung province. The ancient memory of David, who with a slingshot and a small stone once toppled the giant Goliath, and who ruled Israel – and it, was fervently hoped, would raise up a descendant, the Messiah, who would overturn the occupying army and restore the peace and dignity of Israel. With the roll call of the names of the powerful, the spotlight then turns to Joseph, and the woman to whom he was engaged, Mary.

And so Joseph and Mary went from Nazareth to Bethlehem to be registered. It could not have been an easy journey. Maybe the emperor meant for it to be hard. Perhaps Augustus thought he could teach them a lesson – the emperor wanted to know how many subjects he had, and the force of the military would make people jump to do his bidding. Or perhaps he had no idea what troubles this would cause. For those of means, the Roman Empire had its luxuries: great roads and a cosmopolitan culture. Maybe Augustus was so used to luxuries and the ability to travel wherever and whenever he wanted that he could not imagine someone wondering about

how to afford the transportation, and where they would stay. Traveling in a procession of chariots makes one forget the discomfort felt by those who travel on foot or by donkey.

Those with means could make this required registration an adventure. A trip home to see the relatives. Staying at inns or bed and breakfasts with beds turned down nicely with high thread count sheets and a chocolate mint on the pillow. And then, in the morning, all the cousins playing together while the older generations told stories and caught up on the family news. This required registration could become the occasion for a wedding, or a baby shower for the expecting couple.

But for others, it was a more onerous task. Perhaps there would be no greeting from the family upon arrival at the ancestral home. There had been an estrangement, or a scandal. There had been a tragedy, or the loss of the family land. For some, there would be no warm welcome at the end of the journey. For some, the journey itself was a form of torture.

And so it was, we must imagine, for Mary and Joseph. A slow painful journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem. Seventy miles on hilly roads, for an expecting couple deep into their pregnancy. No reservation or welcome at the end of their journey. There was no place for them in the inn. No mention of any welcome from family. No warm bed. No hot meals. No satin sheets. No massage for their weary feet, or to ease her discomfort. And so, with no place for them in the inn, and out of place in a world suddenly strange and hostile, it came time for her to deliver her child. And she wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger, a feed trough.

Can we imagine traveling, not to the Marriott or Saint Paul Hotel, not to grandma's house with a plate of hot cookies waiting, but to a manger, in a dirty stall, where the breath of cattle and the noises of a cow provided the backdrop for Mary's labor? I am not sure we can fully imagine that. And yet, it is to the manger we go on Christmas Eve.

I love this piece of art by He Qi on our bulletin cover.<sup>1</sup> Here we feel the cramped quarters, with Mary and Jesus in the middle with Joseph cramped behind her and cattle leaning in and the shepherds trailed by their sheep.

It was in such an unlikely place as this manger that God's best news was delivered. For in these cramped quarters, there was still room for an angel to hover just inches above their heads.<sup>2</sup> The dark corners are bathed with a royal blue. Here, in a manger, in a stall – of all places in this world – the angel brings news of great joy that still stuns and amazes. To you is born this day a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.

And with that news that makes its way from the lips of angels to the ears of shepherds and then to a lowly manger, there is no place removed from the reaches of God's love. Lowly shepherds who never had a night off from watching over their flocks by night are the first to hear. And then God's news comes to a stall and to parents who found no welcome at the inn or with their family. If baby Jesus is laid in a manger, then all those dark and forgotten corners where mothers in peril lay their children are not beyond God's sight either. There was no place for them at the inn, but that did not stop God. To all who seek hope and meaning and safety on

this night, the message is that there is a place for you in this world. No place, as unlikely as it may be, is too far from the sight and sound of God.

Born in the night, Mary's child. God taking the vulnerable form of a baby, at the mercy of adults to provide care and protection from the cold and the other many dangers.

Frank McCourt, the masterful Irish storyteller, has written a storybook about his mother, Angela and the Baby Jesus. And his mother, just six years old, worries that the baby Jesus figurine will get cold in the nativity set at her church. So she brings the baby Jesus home to her warm bed.<sup>3</sup> And the real baby Jesus will also rely on the hospitality and kindness of others in the coming years. An innkeeper who allows them the use of the stall. The shepherds, the first to come and offer love and greetings to this newborn infant and his parents. Strange magi, or wise men, who bring him gifts and more importantly do not tell all they know to Herod.

And with this story we remember the other mighty acts of God. It seems God is always working through unlikely people in unlikely places. God who promises a child to the old and barren. God who raises up Moses, and gives him the courage to stand up to Pharaoh. Throughout the Bible, God is constantly making a place out of no place. A future out of no future. A people out of no people. A place for those in need that is surrounded by stars and love and the warming breath of cattle. There was no place for Mary and Joseph in the inn, but there was a place for them that night.

And so to us, who come to hear again this story, who hope that the angel's words are true. To those who long for God's peace and hope and joy and love. There is a place for you in this world on Christmas night. You may have to travel to an odd location. You may get your shoes muddy. You may need to look up to the stars with the shepherds, and listen intently for the news. But oh yes, there is a place for you tonight in this world.

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<sup>1</sup> "Nativity" by He Qi was used with permission and can be found on <http://www.heqigallery.com/GALLERY%20NT%20A/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> In Luke's gospel, the angel appears to the shepherds in the fields, who relay the message to Mary and Joseph. In "Nativity" the angel hovers the shepherds as well as Mary and Joseph.

<sup>3</sup> Frank McCourt, Angela and the Baby Jesus (Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers), reviewed by Sarah Ellis in The New York Times Book Review 16 December, 2007.