

***“The Innkeeper’s Story”***  
**Reverend Bill Gause**  
**Overbrook Presbyterian Church**  
**3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Advent**  
**December 16, 2018**

**First Scripture Reading: Isaiah 40:1-5**

<sup>1</sup>Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. <sup>2</sup>Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord’s hand double for all her sins.

<sup>3</sup>A voice cries out: “In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. <sup>4</sup>Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level, and the rough places a plain. <sup>5</sup>Then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.”

**Second Scripture Reading: New Testament Reading: Luke 2:1-20**

<sup>1</sup>In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. <sup>2</sup>This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. <sup>3</sup>All went to their own towns to be registered. <sup>4</sup>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. <sup>5</sup>He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. <sup>6</sup>While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. <sup>7</sup>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.

<sup>8</sup>In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. <sup>9</sup>Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. <sup>10</sup>But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: <sup>11</sup>to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. <sup>12</sup>This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” <sup>13</sup>And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, <sup>14</sup>“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!” <sup>15</sup>When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” <sup>16</sup>So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. <sup>17</sup>When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; <sup>18</sup>and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. <sup>19</sup>But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. <sup>20</sup>The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.



**Sermon: “The Innkeeper’s Story”**

13 Years ago, Mary and I were still on staff at Fort Hill Presbyterian Church down in Clemson, SC. Our Senior Pastor was an older gentleman who ended up serving that congregation 27 years before he retired. He was funny and loved to crack wise and prank people whenever he could.

Jim would often perform the benediction at the close of worship from the back of the sanctuary. But every now and then, he would wait until the very end of the last hymn and then randomly pick one of the four associate pastors to do it. There would be no warning. He would just point at you and that was your cue. Now, the benediction isn’t that hard, but it gets a little more challenging when you don’t know you’re doing it until 10 seconds before you are. It was a little nerve-racking, but he thought it was funny. That’s the kind of guy Jim is.

I remember sitting at a staff meeting with him and my colleagues back in 2005 when we were discussing how to preach Advent that year. He suggested we tell the Christmas story each week, from the perspective of a different character or set of characters in the story. (Sound familiar?)

Mary, he decided, needed to tell Mary's story. She was very pregnant with Will Grey at that time and it just seemed like a perfect fit for a pregnant woman named Mary to tell Mary's story. For me, he chose the Innkeeper. It would be a good story for me to tell, he thought. Such a compelling character. Who is this person that turns away a pregnant woman to give birth in a barn? Yes, he said, and I can almost see him smiling when he said it, Bill, you should tell the Innkeeper's story.

There are only four Sundays in Advent so to be given a chance to preach one of them was quite an honor. I was excited and proud to have my senior pastor's trust that I could preach such an important story during perhaps the biggest season in the church year. It did seem like a meaty story that would be fun to tell. But then I went back to my office and started reading from Luke's account of the nativity. And discovered that there is no Innkeeper in this story. So, I checked Matthew, Mark, John... nothing.

Jim got me. But there was no turning back. It was the Innkeeper's story I was assigned to tell and tell it I would.

Now since we don't really know much about the innkeeper or if there even really was one, we have to use our imaginations a bit. If there is an inn, there must surely be an innkeeper, right? But Luke apparently didn't find it important enough to mention. He only tells us that the baby was born and laid in a manger because "there was no room for them in the inn."

Though not specifically mentioned in Luke's gospel, Christmas pageants often seem to have an innkeeper. When I was watching *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, I noticed that in *their* Christmas pageant, not only did they have an innkeeper, played by Pig Pen, but they also had an innkeeper's wife!

The innkeeper intrigues us because his decision is pivotal to the story. It is he (or she) that makes the decision that sets our holy birth in a cattle stall rather than a warm, cozy bedroom. What kind of Innkeeper was he? Was he a Conrad Hilton type: wealthy and successful with a chain of luxury inns all across the Holy Land? Or was he more of a Tom Bodett type: homey, affordable, and always leaving the light on for you? Was it a nice inn? Or something more akin to a boarding house or hostel? Or just a spare room in someone's home?

There are so many unanswered questions: Was there really no room in the inn, or just no room for poor people like Mary and Joseph? Was the innkeeper kind and sympathetic, or cold and unfeeling? Was the stable offered out of concern for the couple who would otherwise have no shelter from the weather? Was it offered as the only place offering some level of privacy in an otherwise crowded inn? Or was it offered out of a desire to make a few extra bucks off of these desperate strangers? Fact is we know nothing about the innkeeper or his motivation... and so our traditions have filled in the blanks.

In some traditions, the innkeeper is a kindly soul who due to circumstances beyond his control has no choice but to turn the poor couple away. I mean, what is he supposed to do? Roust some other family from their room and give it to Mary and Joseph? But out of concern for them and a desire to help, he grants them access to the stable.

When writing about the Good Samaritan later in his Gospel, Luke tells us about such a helpful innkeeper. Though we remember the Samaritan who stops to help the wounded traveler beside the road, the Samaritan is also helped by the kind innkeeper who agrees to care for the stricken traveler until he is well enough to go about his own way. So perhaps this tradition is close to the truth. Maybe it was such a kindly innkeeper as this one that Mary and Joseph met that night.

But some traditions cast the innkeeper as a miserly character, no doubt with a black hat and a mustache curled up at the ends, who gruffly informs the poor couple that there is "no room" for them. I guess there's just something about turning a pregnant woman away to give birth in a stable that makes it easy for us to see the one responsible as a cold and unfeeling character.

Frederick Buechner envisioned the innkeeper as a simple businessman who was so busy with the tasks of caring for his guests, that he simply missed the coming of his Lord and didn't even realize it. Buechner tells his version of the story in a sermon appropriately entitled "The Innkeeper:"

"Do you know what it is like to run an inn - to run a business, a family, to run anything in this world for that matter, even your own life? It is [like] being lost in a forest of a million trees," said the Innkeeper, and each tree is a thing to be done. Is there fresh linen on all the beds? Did the children put on their coats before they went out? Has the letter been written, the book read? Is there money enough left in the bank? Today we have food in our bellies and clothes on our backs, but what can we do to make sure that we will have them still tomorrow? A million trees. A million things.

"Until finally we have eyes for nothing else, and whatever we see turns into a thing. The sparrow lying in the dust at your feet - just a thing to be kicked out of the way, not the mystery of death. The calling of children outside your window - just a distraction, an irrelevance, not life, not the wildest miracle of them all..."

"Of course, I remember very well the evening they arrived... when the baby came, I was not there," the Innkeeper said. "I was lost in the forest somewhere, the unenchanted forest of a million trees... So when the baby came, I was not around, and I saw none of it..."

"But this I do know. My own true love. All your life long, you wait for your own true love to come - we all of us do - our destiny, our joy, our heart's desire. So how am I to say it, gentlemen? When he came, I missed him."<sup>1</sup>

How often, like Buechner's innkeeper, have we missed Christ in the busy-ness of our own lives? How often do we trade the miracles of life, the wonders of childhood, the mysteries of the world around us, in exchange for one more hour at the office, one more dollar on the ledger, one more point on our GPA?

The temptations of this season will be to use our precious time to prepare the perfect meal and to find the perfect gifts. We will burn the midnight oil studying for finals and burn the mid-day gasoline driving from mall to mall. We will do so much to make the holiday season special when all we really need to do is spend that time in the presence of the people that we love; listening, laughing, sharing the love of Christ through ourselves, and not our things.

In Frederick Buechner's imagination, the innkeeper was unwilling to be distracted from his tasks, but in my own mind, it is what the innkeeper did after the child's birth that is most interesting. For there is to come a visitation by numbers of shepherds, wandering in from the fields, telling amazing tales of angels and newborn kings and no innkeeper worth his salt would have let a group of shepherds just wander into his inn without investigating.

And so, this is how I see the Innkeeper in my own mind...

Now shepherds back then were considered to be a very sketchy lot. Questionable of character, they were rough men who fought hard and drank hard and enjoyed the freedom of the open range. Their presence inspired nervousness in the most courageous of men, but in the innkeeper, they inspired outright fear.

When they came, the innkeeper shrank back from the door. Peering through the corner of the front window, he watched them amble around the inn, on towards the back... to where that poor young couple had much earlier bedded down in the stable for the night.

The innkeeper's mind raced: why had the shepherds come in from the fields? Were they drunk? Would they cause him trouble? And what of the young couple? Were they in danger? When he heard no ruckus from the stable and when peering again through the glass, he noticed the young man welcome them in, the innkeeper began to wonder about the couple. What manner of people were they to associate with shepherds; to consort with the dregs of

society? What trouble had he brought upon himself by allowing these people of obviously questionable character to squat on his property for the night.

As more shepherds gathered at the stable, the innkeeper summoned his courage... and an old axe-handle he kept by the door and ventured out into the courtyard to investigate. But what he heard were not the sounds of drunken carousing, but rather the awed whispers and soft baby talk of grown men, and the gentle cooing of the newborn child. As he approached, the axe-handle held shoulder high, ready to strike should the need arise, he gazed over the hulking shoulder of a shepherd, into his own stable, and saw it transformed by the presence of the mother and child, surrounded by these men, who wrought such fear in his own heart, but who wanted only to see, and to worship.

Moved by the scene, he lowered the heavy implement and letting it rest on the floor, he wondered at what could have brought these lowly people; this simple man and woman, this shady and disreputable lot of shepherds, and he himself, together in such a way. As he looked around the stable, glancing from the resting baby to the face of Mary, weary from labor, to the face of Joseph, beaming with pride, to the faces of the shepherds, filled with wonder at this thing which they had been called to witness, the innkeeper realized that each face reflected not only the light of the torches on the stable walls, but the image of God.

And he knew then as we must know now, that they had been brought together, this most unlikely group of people, in this most unlikely place, by the Love of God, in the life of this small child; born to bring light and life and hope to all men and women and children of every nation, and every race, and every creed.

Forgetting his anxiety and the tasks he had yet to complete, the innkeeper gently pushed his way into the stable and knelt down beside the manger to look upon the child. He knelt there shoulder to shoulder with people whose names and stories he did not know, yet he did not feel afraid, and he did not feel like a stranger.

That's just how I imagine it. Maybe you imagine it differently. Like I said, there is no way to know because the details of the story have been lost in the mists of time. The innkeeper is but a phantom of our own imaginations, left to be seen as we choose to see him. But I think what we learn from him is that Christ often comes to us when we are at our busiest, so we must always be on the look-out; watching and waiting expectantly. And we learn from him that all are welcome in the presence of Christ; all are acceptable and worthy of Christ's love: friends and enemies, and strangers alike; the clean and the dirty, the rich and the poor, and everyone in between. And if they are worthy of Christ's love, then they are worthy of our own.

And those are good lessons to learn, and to keep in front of us during the crush of this holiday season.

To God be all glory, honor, power, and dominion in this world, and in the world that is to come. Amen.

## End Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Buechner, Frederick. "The Birth: The Innkeeper." *The Magnificent Defeat*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1985. 66-68. Print.