

Shiloh United Methodist Church

Luke 2:1-7

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Unwrapping Christmas

Have you ever gotten to the end of opening presents on Christmas morning, and just felt that empty feeling? I remember growing up, so many times getting through all the present opening and thinking to myself, was that all we waited for?

This isn't a complaint, I have been blessed with a great childhood and plenty of gifts. No, instead I want to focus on that moment after all the presents are opened and we all are left with a pile of things. No matter how much care and love went into them, much of what we get on Christmas are physical objects that don't really ever get at the hype the pre-Christmas advertisers love us to embrace.

Sometimes it seems as if we get to the end of Christmas morning and end up back where we started, wanting more.

We fill our season up with enough, how is it we end up back where we began, year after year?

When my oldest daughter was about 2, we were rushing around our house getting ready to go do one of the many Christmas season activities we had planned. As we got on our coats, found our boots, dug out the mitten and grabbed the car keys you could feel our pace quickening. We had to get going there were things to do, and it was one of the list of things to do. Then as I was making my way through the list of things in my head, and executing them I did what you are supposed to do, I turned off the lights.

It was dark and I reached to open the door to the garage. And somewhere in the house space I heard a little voice say, "Dad?"

In my rush to get us out of the house, in my frantic execution of the pre-Christmas prep I had crowded out the light of the season, and left my two-year-old stranded in the dark, unable to see her next step.

We tend to crowd out the important in this season, we crowd out even the light during this dark time of year.

A spiritual teacher name Frank Roger's Junior tells a story about his son Justin.¹

Justin when he was very young and in his stroller loved to hang off the side of the stroller. It wasn't like it was a jungle gym, it was more like his stroller was his crow's nest and he could watch everything by moving around to peer out of it.

Frank describes one day when he and Justin are in the mall and Justin is hanging over the edge of his stroller watching the people rush around him. They are just sitting waiting for someone in those nice sitting areas that dot the mall. Justin kept eying the people coming and going.

All of a sudden there was this woman, arms full of bags and you could tell by the look on her face and her speed of intention that you did not want to get in her way. People would move clear as she came toward them. This woman came barreling down the hallway at the mall and little Justin began to just stare at the intensity of this woman with his big wide eyes. He continued to gaze until he caught the eyes of the woman.

¹ Frank's book

Suddenly as if the intention was a weight lifted she put down her bags next to his stroller. Stared at the child and started cooing and talking to little Justin. Her shoulders dropped her face relaxed and she became another kind of being.

After some time she stood up, breathing more intently, and then she noticed Frank, Justin's father sitting there. She said, "Have a nice day?" In an embarrassed way that was fairly clear to say she hadn't seen Frank the whole time she was interacting with Justin.

Then she picked up her bags and moved away at a slightly less terrifying pace.

Our scripture today is from Luke 2:1-7:

Luke 2:1-7 Common English Bible (CEB)

2 In those days Caesar Augustus declared that everyone throughout the empire should be enrolled in the tax lists. ² This first enrollment occurred when Quirinius governed Syria. ³ Everyone went to their own cities to be enrolled. ⁴ Since Joseph belonged to David's house and family line, he went up from the city of Nazareth in Galilee to David's city, called Bethlehem, in Judea. ⁵ He went to be enrolled together with Mary, who was promised to him in marriage and who was pregnant. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby. ⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.

One my favorite revelations about scripture comes from this scripture passage. Not because of what is in the passage, but because of who is not in the passage. This is the only passage of scripture that mentions the Inn or the guestroom that there is no room for Mary and Joseph to

take board in. And there is one character in the story who is not mentioned in this passage either, do you know who I am talking about?

The Innkeeper

Every year Christmas stories, live nativities, and the infamous Children's pageants are acted out across the world. And everyone I have ever seen has this character, the Innkeeper, who is the one who has the role of turning away Joseph and Mary, and giving them the stable.

There is a well-known story that has been used by hundreds of preachers about a boy named Wally.^H Wally was larger physically and had lower cognitive skills than his peers. All the kids liked him because he had a gentle heart and watched out for the small kids on the playground. The leader of the church play casted Wally as the Innkeeper because it had one line. The one job he had was to stand at the door and say, "No room at the Inn."

Christmas Eve arrived and the play ran smoothly. Shepherds didn't fall over their crooks, angels kept their wings and halos in place, and Mary and Joseph arrived at the Inn, and knocked on the door.

Wally yelled, "No room. Go away!"

Joseph pleaded, "We have traveled so far and we are tired."

Wally again yells, "No room. Go away!"

With all the dramatic nuance a 9-year old Joseph could muster he put his arm around Mary and said, "But please, my wife is having a baby. Don't you have a room where the baby can be born?"

Silence...Wally stared at Joseph. The audience you could see squirm as they wanted to help Wally. Finally, the play director yelled the line

^H Harnish 37

from backstage. Mary and Joseph began to walk away. But seeing Joseph and Mary was more than Wally could take, he shouted after them, “Wait! You can have my room!”

There may be no Inn Keeper in the gospel, but I dare say we have created this character because it is so like so many of us. Rushing around this season, barreling through the mall, ending up with our gifts opened and houses full, only to find our hearts empty again.

William Sloan Coffin the great preacher from Riverside Church in New York once reflected on the character of the Innkeeper.² Wondering if the innkeeper was not mean, but hassled by the unexpected guests. The idea that perhaps Joseph had woken the Innkeeper in the middle of the night to ask for the place for a child to be born. Imagine it today a young teenager knocks on your door late in the night, yet your home is already full of friends and relatives for the holidays. So, the Innkeeper as graciously as he can leads them to the stable find them a soft place and lets them use what he has left for space.

Coffin imagines the innkeeper prospered in his work, opened a few more inns or perhaps in today’s language he might have several Airbnb locations.

Late on a friend asks if the man ever wonders what happened to that child that was born in his stable and the family. Then, surprisingly learns from the friend that the child is Jesus. The innkeeper listens to the story and remembers the mother’s birthing cries, the star in the sky, the shepherd visitors and the wise travelers from the East.

Coffin reminds us, “He knows that while tragic errors remain tragic, no tragedy has to remain pure tragedy for as no sin is beyond God’s

² Harnish 38

forgiveness, the past is never beyond redemption.” Coffin imagines the Innkeeper sending Jesus a message to invite him to come knock a second time.

Coffin goes on to imagine that the owner of the House in Luke 22, is none other than this Airbnb Innkeeper entrepreneur. Coffin said, “I like to picture him standing in the door watching Jesus break and distribute the bread. And when he saw Jesus take the cup, and heard him say that his blood would be poured out for the forgiveness of many, he shed tears of gratitude.” Coffin told that congregation gathered, as we are tonight, “Remember the innkeeper, remember that no sin is beyond forgiveness, no past beyond redemption.”

Our story, the Christian story, God’s story is about God’s love that refuses to let the chaos and clutter of any season push out the light, refuses to let No Vacancy signs keep out God’s love. Instead this story means that there is hope for every single one of us. That God’s love is asking us each moment, “Is there room for Christ, the love he showed the world, to be born through you?”

May you this Christmas feel the gaze of Christ, inviting you to slow down just long enough to know that God’s love is waiting to talk with you, play with you, and help you to be present with exactly what you need.

Amen