

NO ROOM AT THE INN

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Tonight, we are asked to reflect on the story of Christmas, as transmitted through the centuries in Scripture and in popular culture. Tonight, we don't need to debate its historical validity—it is true enough as a story with power in our culture to shape the way we look at the world.

So let's imagine the scene—Mary and Joseph, head to Bethlehem, Joseph's ancestral home, for the Emperor's census. Mary is late in her pregnancy, possibly even in labor.

Along with all of Joseph's distant relatives, they seek shelter for their stay—and since there are so many people who have come back to Bethlehem to be counted, the normal guest rooms are all full. "Sorry," they hear again and again, "I've got no more room in my house for another guest."

And yet one of their relatives, rather than turning them away, remembers that he has some room downstairs, in the small alcove next to the stable, where the animals have been brought inside for the winter.

"It's all I have," perhaps he says to them, "but you can stay there if you want."

Having nowhere else to go, and knowing that the animals' straw would be a softer bed than the ground, Joseph and Mary take shelter where they can. And lucky, too, for it is here in this less-than-ideal accommodation, that Mary gives birth. It is in this downstairs room, a manger filled with hay substituting for a crib, that the baby Jesus makes his appearance into the world.

For many over the intervening centuries, the story of Mary and Joseph's desperate search for shelter on a cold, Bethlehem night has been understood to be important in the story of Christmas.

To some, the important part was that Jesus needed to be rejected by the norms of society so that he could stand outside of them.

Thomas Merton writes that "Into this world, this demented inn, in which there is absolutely no room for him at all, Christ has come uninvited. But because he cannot be at home in it - because he is out of place in it, and yet must be in it - his place is with those others who do not belong, who are rejected because they are regarded as weak; and with those who are discredited, who are denied the status of persons, and are tortured, exterminated. With those for whom there is no room, Christ is present in this world." (Thomas Merton, "Time of No Room", found on-line at

<http://www.lo.redjupiter.com/gems/hartfordstreet/TimeofNoRoom.html>)

For others, though, the story takes on a slightly different meaning. Judith Hoch-Wray asks us to think about this story another way. "Perhaps," she writes, "'no room in the inn' was not a rejection of the Christ child, but a gracious accommodation in the best circumstances the family could provide." (http://www.pulpit.org/articles/exegetical_notes.asp)

Tonight, I want us to think about this story in starkly human terms. Joseph and Mary arrived after a long walk from Nazareth in Galilee, tired, cold and in need of a place to stay. Though the conventional rooms weren't available someone—unnamed in the Scriptures—offered what space he had to them.

Are we prepared to make that same offer? Are we prepared to share our room—whatever we might have—with our relatives who are in need? Are we prepared to offer even our stable to those who might come wandering in the night, cold and hungry?

Are we prepared to be the nameless relative with a full house who couldn't let his distant cousins, weary and pregnant, spend the night outside?

Part of the Christmas lore in my family is the story of my great-grandfather, Giuseppe Falanga. My mother gets to tell the story now—since she knew him. And since I didn't, I don't know how much of it is true—but it is true enough in the impact it has had on my family, as a story with power to shape how we are called to act in the world.

First, you have to understand that in my family, as in many Italian families, Christmas Eve is a big deal. Some call it the Feast of the Fishes, some put a number in there—seven fishes, twelve fishes. Truth be told, we don't bother counting. But it's a big deal—my family celebrated it on Saturday rather than asking me to miss it completely.

Next, it's important to note that I don't come from a long line of wealthy folks. My mother's mother's family were working class people just scraping by in the gritty industrial area near the docks in Brooklyn, half a block away from the traffic on the Gowanus Expressway.

My great-grandfather, it is said, opened his home on Christmas Eve. In the story my mother tells, he invited people in from the streets to eat with his family. Not hundreds—or even dozens—of homeless folks, mind you, but one or two every year—people in the neighborhood without family or food, without someone to spend the holiday with. People who had been turned away from other places because there was no room for them.

Without regard to race or ethnicity, they were invited to partake in the feast set forth by my great-grandmother.

This story, as it is told in my family, has great power. As a child, I learned from this story to be generous with whatever I had. I learned that there will always be enough. I learned that the lessons society teaches us about fear and mistrust of those whom we do not know are wrong. Most of all, I learned that the lesson of Christmas is found in the welcoming of the stranger into one's home.

Jesus, whose later ministry said a lot about breaking down society's barriers that separated people, was an inspiration for my great-grandfather, who taught his family that there always needs to be room for one more—at the table as much as at the inn.

So tonight, I'd like the Christmas story to be a story of unexpected hospitality. A story of sacrifice by someone who didn't have much of his own. A story of the grace of generosity meeting the needs of two folks far from home, and allowing a baby to come into the world whose life would change everything.

Tonight, I ask you how you can be present to those in this world for whom there is no room. How we, as a community, can be present for those who need a soft place to lay their weary heads.

There must be room enough for all. And we can make it so.