Christmas Eve, 122413

All Saints Episcopal Church

Christmas is an occasion that brings families together. I will bet that there is at least one person here tonight wondering how he is going to be able to sleep on that fold-out couch that awaits him. That bar across the back starts to get really uncomfortable sometime in the middle of the night. And someone else is wondering how she’ll fair on the floor whether on an air mattress or in a sleeping bag. That’s what it likes when families gather, the house overflows with people, and we make room.

I read this morning that even Queen Elizabeth, who has invited a larger number of family members than usual to spend Christmas at her Sandringham retreat in Norfolk, has to make room. All her children have children who are getting married and having babies – great-grandchildren for the Queen – and there aren’t enough rooms to accommodate them all now. In fact, some of the younger families are having to sleep in rooms in the servants’ quarters – and the servants are having to double up to make room for them. I’m going to bet that none of them is sleeping on a pull-out couch with a bar in the middle of his back, but it is still a sign of love when even royal families make room for each other.

In the Palestine of Herod the Great, families also looked out for their own. And extended families could get quite extended in some circumstances. This is what makes Mary and Joseph’s dilemma such a problem, as Luke’s gospel tells us that Mary, “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.”

What were they doing in a stable with no bed for their baby but a manger, which is a polite word for a feed trough? Where was their family? Bethlehem was Joseph’s ancestral home. If Joseph had to go to Bethlehem, his brother and sisters, father and mother, and his cousins, too, would have - at least whichever of those family members were still alive. Each of them would have had to find room in Bethlehem, and once they found room, they would have been obligated by duty to make room for Joseph and his very new, very pregnant wife, Mary.

So why were Mary and Joseph in a stable? Mary and Joseph were in a stable because there was no room for them in an inn. The shepherds did not find a stable overflowing with extended family knocking themselves out to make some better arrangements for the new baby. The shepherds found a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger. No mother-in-law, no aunt, no cousins and no sisters-in-law. Just a very young mother, doing for her baby what she knew to be best, with the father trying to make things a bit better, the best he could under the circumstances.

It is a mystery why this happened. We can guess, as some have, that it was because Joseph was older, and Mary was his second wife. He had no surviving relatives to make room for him and his young bride. Or we can guess with others that the scandal of Mary’s pregnancy had stretched the limits of family to the point that the Holy Family was left out when it came time to sort out sleeping arrangements back in Bethlehem.

But what we do know, and know with certainty, is that Mary and Joseph were left to fend for themselves. There was no room for them in Bethlehem. In a town packed to the rafters with fellow ancestors of King David, no one could find room for Mary and Joseph, who must have felt quite alone as they laid their baby in the manger.

This scene makes Jesus’ words of the coming judgment in Chapter 25 of the Gospel of Matthew all the more poignant:

“‘I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat; I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink; I was a stranger, and you did not invite me in; naked, and you did not clothe me; sick, and in prison, and you did not visit me.’ Then they themselves also will answer, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked, or sick, or in prison, and did not take care of you?’ Then He will answer them, ‘Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.’”

Mary and Joseph were strangers, and no one invited them in. And those who shut their doors to Joseph as he looked for room for his great-with-child wife, were shutting their doors on God incarnate. When they did not make room for that one pregnant girl, they did not make room for the maker of heaven and earth to be born among us.

Yet, the story of Christmas is a story of good news of great joy for all people, not just those surrounded by family tonight, and not just those who will celebrate by exchanging expensive gifts. Christmas is exceedingly joyful good news because in coming to a couple who were themselves lost and left out, God turned the world upside down.

The Christmas story did not start with Mary and Joseph alone in that stable in Bethlehem. And the Christmas story did not begin with the angel appearing to Mary, or even with the prophets who foretold of the event centuries earlier. The Christmas story began with God looking at God’s creation, so lovingly made and so needlessly gone astray.

God’s bold and daring plan to fix that was incarnation, the Word of God becoming human. In becoming human, God sided with the oppressed and the outcasts, and showed it by coming first to poor, lowly and even despised people.

The idea of God becoming human in lowly circumstances is astonishing, for it means that God knows us and loves us even as we are, whether we spend tonight alone or spend it trying to sleep on a fold-out couch in a house full of extended family. The miracle of Immanuel, “God with us,” is that we see that though Mary and Joseph may have been forgotten by others, they were never forgotten by God.

Jesus was raised by Mary and Joseph – people with nothing but their love of God and neighbors to recommend them for the job. They had no status, no power and no wealth. The only thing they really had to offer was love. Having nothing to offer but love is exactly what the creator of heaven and earth had in mind all along.

We who gather tonight in the warm glow of the light of God’s love should be challenged by this vision of a world turned right-side-up by a baby in a manger. Since we have seen that he who the universe could not contain may be found in a stable, and in the bread and wine of communion, then our eyes can be better focused on seeing our Lord in the people in need all around us. And it is this right-side-up vision of the world that is indeed good news of great joy for all people!