

Luke 2:1-7

“And it came to pass in those days, that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.) And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child. And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.”

There is a wonderful book entitled *Seven Stories of Christmas Love* the author is Leo Buscaglia. He writes about arriving in Bali, which is in Indonesia on the day before Christmas. Bali is a Hindu land. He spent the day in the village of Ubud. The natives of that village welcomed him with open arms and invited him to join in their feasts and celebrations.

At one point Leo mentions to his hosts how happy he is to be with them at Christmas. The natives of Ubud ask, “What is Christmas?” Leo then tells them the Christmas story. The villagers are captivated by the beauty of the story, but one point thoroughly confused them. Why did no one invite Mary and Joseph into their home? Why didn’t anyone make room at the inn for the pregnant mother about to give birth? In their culture room would always be made for visitors. Leo left a few days later with the villagers still puzzling over why no one would make room for Mary and Joseph.ⁱ

Even before He was born, Jesus was rejected by this world. I thought about this story I read recently, a really sad story about Christmas. It’s a true story about a woman named Carolyn Jones. Carolyn was born in rural Georgia in 1946.

She was eleven when her mother died and her father abandoned her shortly there-after. Carolyn supported herself by working at local farms, cleaning houses, and babysitting the neighbors' children.

Carolyn recalls one Christmas that forever shaped her life. Again she was only eleven when her mother died, and her father abandoned her. Carolyn felt so alone, and isolated from the world, she hadn't eaten a good meal in a while. On Christmas Day, the feeling of loneliness finally overwhelmed her. Carolyn decided to visit her best friend, whom she calls, "the preacher's daughter."

Carolyn remembers that the preacher's house was warm and dry, in marked contrast to the conditions at Carolyn's cold, damp cabin. The house was fully decorated with a big tree, open presents were set around the front of the tree, and the table was covered in platters of food. In that moment, Carolyn felt safe and secure and even thought she would get to celebrate a real Christmas at her friend's house. But then it happened the preacher did something which devastated little Carolyn and shaped her for years to come.

The preacher thanked her for coming and then asked her if she would come back some other day, so he and his family could spend time together at Christmas.ⁱⁱ

I'm a pastor, a husband and a father, and I understand wanting to spend time with family, but here is a child who was one of his daughter's best friend's and he had never taken the time to learn her story. Here's what Carolyn wrote many decades later about that event, "I haven't been strong enough to find forgiveness . . . forgiveness for what he did." She goes on to mention others who during her life sought to hurt her and/or do her harm, but, she says, "I don't hate them the way I hate that preacher, mainly because they never professed to be a loving child of God and then turn around and turn someone away who just wanted to feel safe and have something to eat."

Unfortunately we live in a world in which too many people find no room in the inn. We don't like to think about that especially during this time of the year, but it's true. There are people all over this world who find no room at the inn. They are shut out. Rejected! They may even be close friends and by our actions we constantly tell them "there's no room." Maybe not in words or in our actions, but by our lack of words and lack of actions.

Do we truly know the story of those we call friends? We call this our church family but do we really know their story? Have we, have you taken the time to get to know each other's story? Is there room for their story?

Today we all live fast paced lives. We want fast food, we want fast internet, we also want fast cell phone service. We want everything fast. We want what we want when we want it, and when we want it we want it fast. I was in a store then other day just walking around waiting on Patricia and I walked past the section where you buy greeting cards. I noticed something, they actually sell individual Christmas cards. Did you know that you can buy individual Christmas cards? All Christmas cards don't come out of on box. It then occurred to me how we can't even give time to picking out individual cards for family and friends. We buy a box and quickly sign our names and mail off. Fast ... Fast ... Fast!

I know, I know it's cheaper to buy a box of cards than spend the extra money buying individual cards which took time to read and specifically choose for that friend and/or family or church family member. After all it's not as if they were for real friends and family. Is there room? There are many people in this world who feel that there is no room for them.

Some are from the wrong sides of the tracks. Some just choose to live and look differently than most. I believe most of them can relate to the story of that first Christmas. *“She wrapped Him in swaddling clothes and placed Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.”*

It is for people such as these that the Bethlehem child was born. The fact that there was no room in the inn is no accidental part of the Christmas story. Indeed, it’s the heart of the Christmas story. This child was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn. He identified with the least and lowest on earth even from the moment of His birth. He was left out, rejected. That is how He was born and that is how He died, and those in this world who are also rejected are the very ones He came to seek and to save, whether they be refugees in Africa, or members of a Hell’s Angels motorcycle gang, or a poor hungry eleven-year-old girl in Georgia named Carolyn whose mother had died and whose father abandoned her and whose only wish on a Christmas Eve was a meal with her best friend, the preacher’s daughter. To such belongs the Kingdom of heaven.

By the way, today Carolyn Jones is a successful business woman who owns and runs C&S Paving in Atlanta. One consequence of that long-ago rejection is that every year she cooks enough food at Christmastime to feed scores of people. If anyone were to drop by at Christmas and need a meal, she wants to be ready to welcome them.

I wish all the shut-out and shunned people around the world could have their lives turn out like that. If you and I do our part, maybe some of them will. Is there room in the inn? The people of Bali were surprised that anyone would turn away Mary and Joseph under those conditions. How about you? How about me? Would we have turned them away? We need to make room in our hearts for all those who are troubled, lonely, and forgotten. Because when we make room for them, we are making room for Christ.

What began first in Bethlehem when the innkeeper turned Him away was to become a recurrent theme. Do we have room for Christ in our lives? When the innkeeper was presented with this unexpected situation that night, he faced what I call a defining moment. At that point the innkeeper became every man, woman, and young person. Every one of us is asked: Do you have room?

The fact is that Jesus comes knocking at the door of our hearts many times in life, in various ways, through various people, through various events. Well, you may say, I am not a preacher or I am not a theologian. How am I supposed to recognize these times? That's precisely the point. You are given no more preparation for revelation than the innkeeper was given that night. He was just an ordinary person like you and me. He could have said: If I had only known that this was the Messiah I would have gladly opened the door, but if he had known that, he would have responded out of awe, fear, or courtesy not out of compassion. So the Messiah comes to us just as He came to the Bethlehem innkeeper. Not in the form of a King with all his grandeur, but in the form of family, friends, or unknown people in need — just like Mary and Joseph. And whether or not we receive Christ in depends on how we respond to these people.

The innkeeper claimed that he had no room. Isn't the crowded inn a rather appropriate symbol of our lives? So cluttered not with important things but with things that don't amount to a hill of beans, that there is just no time, no energy, no money, no room left over. There is just no room in our lives for the Messiah.

And invariably, just as in Bethlehem, the Messiah comes to us when we so often least expect Him. You'll notice that Mary and Joseph did not make their appearance at the beginning of the rush season but late in the night when the poor innkeeper was tired and irritable after a hard day's work. Then came the knock on the door...that unexpected knock of destiny.

So the advent message to us is to watch and wait. Keep our minds and our hearts open for His coming. For the hour approaches when the Messiah will come to you and to me. And like the Bethlehem innkeeper we will be forced to make a decision. Will our lives be so cluttered with incidentals that there will be no room? Or will we open the door and gladly welcome Him in. To the innkeeper, the knock that came that night was just another of a long series of bothersome interruptions. That is how some respond to God in their life. Yes. Take the stable, Go! Do anything; just leave me alone. God knocks at the door of every person's heart. The question is — will there be room enough in your life to let him in. Is There Room?

ⁱ Christian Voices. Cited by www.monday-fodder.com/.

ⁱⁱ Carolyn Jones, *A Foxfire Christmas*, edited by Eliot Wigginton and his students (Chapel Hill, N.C.: The University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp.125-130.