

“No Place”
Luke 2:1-7
December 20, 2009

INTRODUCTION:

We are all familiar with the part of the Christmas story in which Mary and Joseph found the inn at full capacity, and were forced to stay in the stable with the animals. Justin Martyr, an early church father who lived about 150 AD, said that this stable was nothing more than a cave. Our focus tends to go to the difficulty of such lodgings. A stable, of course, is far less than ideal for a night's lodging, especially for an anxious husband and a young mother just concluding the rigors of childbirth. But I don't think the rough circumstances of their lodgings are intended to be the central point. There is a sense in which the phrase “no place” describes everything about the life and death of Jesus. He lived as a man not welcomed into any place, and he died the same way.

To have no place in the inn is an inconvenience, but more than that. It is a reminder of one's unimportance. Back in 1989, I led a team of 25 people to Uganda in order to build a house for some missionaries there. We were delayed in route, and by the time we landed in Nairobi, Kenya, we were about ten hours late. Upon arriving at the hotel at which we had reservations, I was told that since we were late and hadn't called ahead, they had given our rooms away to someone else. It was the height of their vacation season, and hotel rooms were hard to come by in Nairobi at that time of year. I felt just a little disrespected, and a lot powerless. But our situation was fundamentally different from that of Mary and Joseph. We were white people in an East African nation, and as such, we were viewed as important and, more significantly, as those with financial resources. So rooms were somehow found for us in another hotel. Not so with Mary and Joseph. They were without financial resources.

If we read this passage in light of Luke's overall purpose in writing, I believe he is making a point more significant than the outward circumstance of a birth in a barn. There was no place for Jesus throughout his life and death because he was an outsider, one who didn't belong. Jesus, the Son of God, is the consummate insider. For all eternity he has been within the Trinitarian circle. But now he becomes a social outsider. Have you ever been the victim of social exclusion, even if unintentional? Perhaps there was a party for which you did not receive an invitation. Or maybe you have been treated with condescension because you didn't go to the right school or come from the right part of town. Jesus was an insider who came to earth as an outsider in order to make insiders of us. We're going to look at these themes as we consider this phrase “no place” in description of Jesus' circumstances from his earliest appearance on the earth.

I. Where He Had No Place

The place where there was no place for Jesus was Bethlehem. The Old Testament had prophesied that the Messiah would be born there, and this prophecy seemed to be well-known in Israel. But Caesar Augustus did not know of it. Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth, located some 80 miles north of Bethlehem. Joseph had to go to Bethlehem in order to be registered in a census ordered by Augustus. He was just trying to raise taxes for his empire, but without realizing it was only acting to fulfill the will of God, who is the ultimate director of all history.

It's not clear why Mary accompanied Joseph to Bethlehem so late in her pregnancy. All the commentators agree that it was not necessary for her to do so. Only men needed to be present for these registrations. There are three possible explanations that come to mind. It's possible that Joseph simply wanted to be around for this special birth, and knew that the only way to make that happen was to keep Mary with him. It's also possible that in her hometown of Nazareth things were so rough for Mary, who had gotten pregnant prior to her formal marriage to Joseph, that she couldn't bear the thought of a birth without his presence. Or it may be that Joseph and Mary were both aware of Micah's prophecy and came in fulfillment of that prophecy. We learn from Matthew's gospel (2:22) that Joseph planned on returning from Egypt to Judea, where Bethlehem was located, instead of his hometown region of Galilee. He only changed his plans and went to Nazareth in Galilee after the angel warned him. Why would he go to Judea unless he knew of Micah's prophecy and was going where he thought he was supposed to go? Regardless of the reason, Joseph does take Mary to Bethlehem, where Jesus is born.

Bethlehem makes its first appearance in Scripture in Genesis. It was the place where Jacob's beloved wife, Rachel, gave birth to Benjamin. But it was a difficult birth and Rachel died in the process. As a result of this tragedy, it was remembered first as a burial place, not a birthplace. Bethlehem was also the hometown of Naomi and her husband, Elimelech, before they left for Moab. They left Bethlehem, whose name means "house of bread," because of a famine. Apparently, the house of bread was all out of bread. But Naomi would return there after the famine, and her widowed daughter-in-law would fall in love with Boaz. Their resulting marriage produced Jesse, whose youngest son was named David. He became the mighty King David of Israel. The Messiah would come from the line of David, and Herod found out about that. As a result, he ordered the execution of all baby boys in Bethlehem two years of age and younger. So Bethlehem became the place where another prophecy was fulfilled, this one from Jeremiah. **"A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more"** (Jer. 31:15). The place where Jesus had no place was a place of mourning. Think of Bethlehem as ground zero for God's invasion

of the earth. He begins his work of establishing his kingdom of peace and joy in a town of sadness and mourning. The whole earth is like Bethlehem, filled with sadness and mourning. He comes to the place of mourning in order to turn it into a place of joy. As the psalmist says, **“You have turned for me my mourning into dancing”** (30:11). Or in the words of our famous Christmas hymn, “He comes to make his blessings flow far as the curse is found.”

II. Why He Had No Place

At one level, the reason for the lack of a place for Jesus was quite simple. The decree of Caesar Augustus that required this registration led to many people having to travel. They all needed places to stay, and there weren't enough of them. It was simply the law of supply and demand. Joseph and Mary were poor people, and when demand rises, the poor are always the first to go lacking. So Joseph and Mary had to make do with whatever was available. No room was available, but there was shelter from the weather in the stable. Stables don't come equipped with cribs, but they do have feeding troughs. In a pinch, it could serve as a crib.

But there is more going on here than the simple fact of two poor people not being able to find hotel accommodations. Jesus' whole life was lived in the way it began in Bethlehem. Just as there was no place for him there, so there continued to be no place for him throughout his life. During the years of his ministry, he lived as a homeless man. As Luke quotes Jesus later, **“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head”** (9:58). Jesus had no place during his life because he was an outsider. He was from a nation of outsiders. Israel had little power in this day, being a small part of the larger Roman Empire. He was an outsider even within this outsider nation. He was from Nazareth, far from Jewish power centered in Jerusalem. And he died as an outsider. Roman citizens were not allowed to be crucified, but Jesus was outside that elite group. And he died as an outsider in his own nation. The Romans would not have put him to death had it not been for the voices of his fellow Jews calling in unison for his crucifixion.

All of these indicators of Jesus' outsider status pale in comparison to one dominant way in which he was an outsider. Jesus was an outsider with God. When he died on the cross, he cried out, **“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”** (Matt. 27:46). The Son of God was in the inner ring of the Trinity. Now he is kicked out. The reason there was no place for Jesus in Bethlehem, no place for Jesus throughout his life, and no place for Jesus in his death, is that there might be a place for you and me. The sin of our first parents, Adam and Eve, has made outsiders of us all. They became outsiders when they were kicked out of Eden, and we have all been trying to return ever since. But we can't return. There is no place for a sinner in the garden of God. So we read these solemn words at the end of Genesis 3: **“He drove out the**

man, and at the east of the garden of Eden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life” (v. 24).

The writer to Hebrews tells us why Jesus became an outsider. **“For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp. So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood”** (13:11-12). The blood allows access into the holy places. Jesus lived and died as an outsider in our place, as a substitutionary sacrifice. He did so that we might become insiders.

C. S. Lewis talks about the common fear we share of being an outsider.

I don't believe the economic motive and the erotic motive account for everything that goes on in the world. It's a lust... a longing to be inside, [which] takes many forms... You want... the delicious knowledge that just we four or five—we are the people who (really) *know* ... As long as you are governed by that desire you will never be satisfied. Until you conquer the fear of being an outsider, an outsider you will remain... (quoted in Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, p. 81).

Ricky Gervais is the British comedian who created the hit comedy *The Office*, which is produced in quite a number of countries with different actors. All of them pay Gervais a fee for every episode, which has made him a millionaire many times over. He grew up poor, the youngest of four children. His father was a laborer, and they had to live in public housing. Gervais says he still feels like an outsider. In a recent *60 Minutes* program he said, “I still feel it, a little bit sometimes if I'm with very, very over-privileged people. I still think they're waiting for me to make a faux pas, to pick up the wrong fork.”

No amount of money or success will be sufficient to remove the outsider feeling, because the truth is that our sin has made outsiders of us all. Access to God's garden is blocked. But Jesus has come that it might be open. By his blood as an outsider he has opened the way to join the most significant insider group of all time—the family of God.

III. What Place He Makes Out of No Place

The next part of Luke 2 records the appearance of the angels to the shepherds, and their resulting visit to the stable where Jesus was lying in the manger. As the shepherds left, Luke records that they did so **“glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen”** (v. 20). The stable became a place of joy because Jesus was there. Throughout the Bible, Jesus is described as the one who makes a place of refuge and joy for his people. He is the one who reopens the path to Eden. As that glorious Christmas hymn says, “O

come, thou Key of David, come and open wide our heavenly home; make safe the way that leads on high, and close the path to misery.” Jesus came as one with no place in order to give us a place of security and joy. So we see a picture of him in the ark Noah built. Just as the ark provided a home and refuge for Noah from the waters of judgment, so Jesus provides a refuge for us. And we see Jesus in the Passover, as the angel of death went throughout Egypt putting to death the firstborn of every family. The only exception was in the case of the homes where a lamb had been slain and its blood sprinkled on the door. In every home throughout Egypt that night, there was a death—either of a firstborn son or of a lamb. Jesus is the Lamb of God, under whose blood we rest secure. And in the New Testament we read the same thing in even clearer language. Though Jesus had no place, he makes it clear that the same will not happen to his followers. At the end of his life he tells them, **“In my Father’s house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?”** (John 14:2). Jesus came to endure the curse of no place in order that we might inherit the blessing of a permanent place with God. The Bible sums up all of redemption by using this language of place. Speaking of heaven as the new Jerusalem, the next to last chapter of the Bible says, **“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God’”** (Rev. 21:3).

For Jesus to provide such a place for us by reopening the gates of paradise did not come cheaply. Consider its cost to Joseph and Mary. Parents delight in preparing a place for their new baby, fixing up the baby’s room to be the perfect place. And parents naturally want to give to their children every advantage imaginable, and to protect them at all costs. But Joseph and Mary were too poor to provide very much for their son. But the cost was far greater for Jesus’ heavenly Father. When Jesus’ life came to an end, not only had he lost his place in his nation and among his followers, but he lost his place with God. The Father was willing to forsake the Son. The Son began his life with his arms bound by the swaddling cloth in which his mother wrapped him. A swaddling cloth wrapped a baby in mummy style, with its arms to its side. Jesus ended his life with his arms bound to a cross, suffering in our place.

CONCLUSION:

In the Christmas pageants that children share with us this time of year, the innkeeper is often cast as the villain in this story. He provided no place for Jesus. What was his error? I think there were two. He was busily preoccupied and was ignorant of who Jesus really is. Let us make sure we don’t repeat his mistakes. Will you make a place for the one who came as an outsider that we might be made insiders?