**No Room**

*Rev. John Allen*

In the church where I grew up, the Christmas pageant was one of the biggest undertakings of the whole year.

The cast was comprised of about 70 people, of all ages.

Children played animals, shepherds, and angels.

Adults played the three kings, and the angel Gabriel.

And the Holy Family was always portrayed by whatever family in the church had most recently had a baby…

I missed out on that opportunity to a kid named Alex, but just a couple of weeks.

But other than the Holy Family, through the years I played almost every role in that pageant. Including returning home to the church when I was a Seminary student in order to play one of the three kings…

But of all the parts we ever played, no doubt my favorite was the year we played one of the innkeepers families.

See in that pageant there were three families of inn keepers, the kind but helpless innkeepers, to stage right.

Who when Mary and Joseph came knocking reply regretfully:

“We've been full for days. There is no room. Not an inch. You might try across the way”

That was the inn on stage left, kept by the so called “grumpy innkeepers” a role my parents played with gusto on more than on occasion.

Jospeh’s knock is met with the curt reply “what do you want.”

“Please” he implores. “We have traveled very far and my wife she is about to…”

“No room” the innkeeper interrupts him. And slams to door, and as they walk away, the innkeeper rolls his eyes and says “A room indeed, who do they think they are.”

By the way, I did not have to look this up. I know this whole pageant more or less by heart.

In fact, when I was reading the scripture for today and I realized that the reference to the inns is just one little line, “there was no room.” I was surprised. Because in my heart all these years the story was filled with those colorful characters from my childhood pageant.

So finally, Mary and Joseph come to Inn #3. Stage center. And are turned away. And as they begin to turn and walk away, it is a child who yells. “Wait, the barn, they could stay in the barn!” the father demurs “It’s only an empty cow stall.”

“It will be enough. Thank you.” Says Joseph relieved, as the lights dim. And scene.

I know that the Bible story doesn’t say any of that. But in my heart that has always been the story. Because I heard that story year after year after year in just that way, it has been inscribed on my heart.

And it has been such a gift to me.

Because I have a problem. One that I imagine many of us share.

There’s no room.

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Sometimes, especially this time of year, it feels like life is so filled up, with responsibilities and jobs, with parties, and cards, and shopping… That it just feels like there isn’t room for much else.

Sometimes I worry that this season gets so full, that God’s greatest gift to the world could show up at our door and our lives would already be too full to receive it.

Sometimes I worry that this time of year is so hectic. Or perhaps it stirs up such pain, and sorrow, and weariness, that we cannot do anything else but turn away the gift of God that has come to dwell with us.

I have grown to appreciate the story, because I can so easily imagine myself as one of those inn keepers.

Having just finished dealing with the guests I have, a pile of dishes in the sink already, and Aunt so-and-so has had a few too many cups of egg nog, and the kids are wired on cookies and candy-canes, and the cat is trying to climb the tree.. and there is a knock on the door, and my first thought would be, “What could this be.” “Theres no room.”

And the truth is that there are people no going door to door. Looking for help. They may not themselves walk up your front stoop, but we have neighbors who are living out in the cold, there are refugees around the world seeking safety, families fearing deportations, there are children who ran away from homes where they could not be loved because of who they are.

You don’t really need me to remind you of all that. We know. We know.

We know that there is much work to be done. We know that there is more each one of us could do, to reduce our carbon footprint, or support a worthy cause, or join a march for justice, or send some letters, and make some phone calls.

We know that we should say something when a relative makes a racist remark at Christmas dinner, or when we see someone on the street who needs help.

We know all that.

But there’s no room. There is just no room.

We are tired and we are busy. And since no one of us can do everything. Sometimes it seems easier to just let it be…

Sometimes I worry that this season gets so full, that God’s greatest gift to the world could show up at our door and our lives would already be too full to receive it.

One year, in that Christmas Pageant, I got to play the child of the 3rd innkeeper family. It’s that child who boldly and heroically runs to the front of the stage and says “Wait the barn! They could stay in the barn!”

The father demurs “It’s only an empty cow stall.”

“It will be enough.”

My hope for us this Christmas is that each one of us gains that child’s vision. The ability to see an opportunity instead of scarcity, the ability to focus on what can be done, rather than what can’t be done. The ability to realize that he had a gift to offer this family. He had something that maybe, just maybe, could bring a little warmth, and light, and love into the world.

It was only an empty barn. But it was there where a poor and weary couple, from a forgotten corner of an empire found rest, it was there that shepherds gathered and rubbed elbows with kings.

It was there that Christ was born.

I know we are busy. I know there is no room.

But I want to ask you each to try to experience life, for this moment, like that child who worked in his parent’s inn. I want you to open just enough space in your heart. I want you to try to see an opportunity, a possibility, where it might seem like there is only scarcity.

I want you to wonder: “What gift do I have that can make room for God’s love?”

“What gift do I have that can make room for God’s love?”

It might not seem like much.

It may just be an empty cow stall.

But in God’s hands, it is enough.