

[ISAIAH 52:7-10](#)

[LUKE 2:1-7](#)

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THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME

The annual Children's Christmas Pageant went VERY well. Mary and Joseph came to Bethlehem on cue. There, they were met by a 9-year-old INNKEEPER, who dutifully informed them that, even though he would LOVE to help them, there was just *NO room in the INN*. He was SORRY, but that *No Vacancy* sign out FRONT was CORRECT. But THEN, he looked AGAIN at Mary and Joseph, who really DID look TIRED from their journey. And suddenly, he blurted out: *BUT, there's a great MOTEL, WITH cable, right around the corner!* Well, the CONGREGATION went WILD! The PAGEANT was in a SHAMBLES! After all: that's NOT the way the story of Mary, Joseph, and the innkeeper is supposed to GO! Or IS it?

Most of us KNOW the story by HEART. Mary and Joseph come to Bethlehem, after a 2-week journey on foot from Nazareth. They COME for the government's CENSUS. By tradition, everyone must be REGISTERED in his city of origin, in the place of his family's ROOTS. And, because EVERYONE is traveling, there is NO ROOM for them in the INN. SO, Mary is forced to give BIRTH to baby Jesus in a STABLE, probably a CAVE on the outskirts of the village. And THAT'S the REAL story! Or IS it?

You see: I learned something NEW this Christmas. There's a biblical scholar, Kenneth Bailey, who points out that what OUR Bibles translate as the word, *INN*, is actually the GREEK word, *kataluma*. And *kataluma* LITERALLY means *guest room*. SO, it's NOT an *inn* or a motel, but a GUEST room. LATER, in the Gospel of Luke, we read the story of the Good Samaritan, who takes the WOUNDED man to a *pandokheion*, and THAT is the Greek word for *INN*. But in THIS story, Luke says that there was NO ROOM for Mary and Joseph in the *kataluma*, NO ROOM for Mary and Joseph in the family's *guest room*. SO, they must be placed ELSEWHERE in the home. You see: the actual WORDING in Luke's Gospel does NOT say: *there was no room in the INN*. It says: *there was no appropriate PLACE in the GUEST room*.

In the typical Middle Eastern HOME, according to Bailey, there was, and is, a designated ROOM for overnight visitors. And it would be unthinkable, according to the dictates of mid-Eastern HOSPITALITY, for out-of-town relatives to be sent to an INN by their OWN family. And Mary and Joseph, on that first Christmas were among RELATIVES. THEY had come HOME to Bethlehem, because JOSEPH was *of the house and lineage of David*, and BETHLEHEM was *the CITY of David*. The PROBLEM was that so MANY relatives had come HOME to Bethlehem for the government's ENROLLMENT that, by the time Mary and Joseph arrived, the guest room, or the *kataluma*, was already FILLED. Therefore, THEY had stay in the NEXT best PLACE in the family's HOME, which BAILEY says would have been an OUTER room, a room where the family's ANIMALS were brought IN for the night, especially in cold weather. THEN, in the MORNING, the animals were led back OUTSIDE, and the room was SWEPT and used for OTHER family activities. And THAT, according to Bailey, is where the MANGER was kept, the feeding trough for the animals. It was IN that OUTER room. (Kenneth Bailey, *Poet and Peasant* [Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans, 1976])

It's sort of like those of you who have come HOME for Christmas, and will SLEEP tonight on the SOFA in the LIVING room, or curled up in a SLEEPING BAG in the DEN, because there is no *appropriate PLACE* for you in the GUEST room. Uncle JOE from Dorchester ARRIVED before you DID, and HE got the GUEST room. And rather than send you to *Holiday Inn Express*, BECAUSE your family LOVES you so MUCH and is so DELIGHTED to have EVERYONE home for Christmas, THEY are giving YOU the honor of sleeping on the FLOOR in the PLAYROOM. Well, THAT'S the way it WAS for Mary, Joseph, and baby Jesus. The BIBLE says: *And she gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no ROOM for them in the kataluma, in the family's GUEST room.* (Luke 2:7)

Now, THIS makes the story of that FIRST Christmas FEEL very DIFFERENT, doesn't it? COULD it BE that Jesus was NOT born in the STABLE of some cold and impersonal INN, but rather in the outside ROOM of His family's HOMESTEAD, where aunts and uncles and other random relatives could all DOTE over the new baby? Could it BE? And MAYBE, for Mary and Joseph, these few days with FAMILY were a

SPECIAL kind of TREASURE. Soon enough, they would be forced to FLEE for their lives as REFUGEES from the WRATH of King HEROD. Soon enough, they would be facing DARK and difficult days in EGYPT! But for NOW, they were **HOME**! For NOW, they were among FAMILY! Yes, it's a very DIFFERENT way of LOOKING at this STORY, isn't it? When God Incarnate, little JESUS, was MOST frail and vulnerable -- just a tiny BABY -- He was CARED for in the context of a **HOME**! And He was SAFE, surrounded by the mundane BLESSINGS of a FAMILY. WOW! **I've** never THOUGHT of it THAT way before, have YOU?

Now, I know that SOME of you have made an AMAZING effort in order to be **HOME** this Christmas. Maybe you've waited in INCREDIBLY long LINES at airports! Or maybe you've suffered the indignities of traveling I-95 in backed-up traffic for HOURS in order to get here. And SO, TONIGHT, even that fold-out SOFA-BED -- the one with the BAR running right through the MIDDLE of its 2-inch FOAM, that so called *mattress* -- even THAT will feel GOOD tonight, BECAUSE you're finally **HOME**! You're **HOME** for CHRISTMAS! You're **HOME** with your FAMILY! And as *E.T.* will TELL you -- or DOROTHY in the *Wizard of Oz*: *There's NO PLACE like HOME! There's NO PLACE like HOME!*

***Oh, there's no place like home for the holidays
'Cause no matter how far away your roam
If you long for the sunshine & a friendly gaze
For the holidays, you can't beat home sweet home!***

Oh, there's something about being HOME for the holidays... at least for MOST of us, though not ALL of us!

But you know: when WE, in the CHURCH, talk about coming **HOME** for CHRISTMAS, we're talking about something much MORE important than YOUR little homecoming and MINE. AND, we're even talking about something MUCH more important than Mary and Joseph's coming **HOME** for the holidays, or little Jesus lying safely in that MANGER because there's no ROOM in the family's *kataluma*. Yes, when WE in the CHURCH talk about coming **HOME** for CHRISTMAS, WE'RE talking about **GOD'S** homecoming. We're talking about the **Lord of Lords**, the **King of Kings**, the **Prince of Peace**, the **Savior of the world**, coming **HOME**! You see: WE humans CANNOT get to GOD, no matter WHAT we DO! SO, GOD comes to US! GOD comes AMONG us in this very ORDINARY, mundane, FAMILY story that we all CHERISH as the NATIVITY, as the BIRTH of little JESUS. And what WE call the *INCARNATION* is **GOD WITH us**. It's just **GOD** sleeping on that fold-out SOFA downstairs in the PLAYROOM. It's **GOD** coming out of the COLD, in order to dwell AMONG us. Yes, it's **GOD-WITH-US**! And THAT'S what WE in the CHURCH are talking about when WE talk about coming **HOME** for Christmas! And THAT, my friends, is one POWERFUL conviction! You know: there are not MANY religions in this world that can TOLERATE so much DOMESTICATING of the DIVINE, of GOD. MOST religions are just plain SCANDALIZED by OUR faith in a GOD who takes on human FLESH and is BORN among us, a God who becomes ONE of us, a God who is BORN in a MANGER in the family's OUTSIDE room, because there's NO ROOM in the family's *kataluma*, and a God who is BORN as a helpless, tiny INFANT, no less. You know: when MOST people sing, *I'll be HOME for Christmas*, they're talking about US and OUR little homecomings. But when CHRISTIANS sing, *I'll be HOME for Christmas*, WE'RE talking about the **MESSIAH**! WE'RE talking about **EMMANUEL**! WE'RE talking about **GOD-WITH-US**! You see: that's GOD'S proclamation: ***I'LL be HOME for Christmas! I'll be in YOUR home and yours and yours!***

And THAT'S why we're HERE tonight, isn't it? It's because MOVING right into the MIDDLE of YOUR family and MINE -- with ALL of its problems and secrets, with ALL of its sin and silliness, and with ALL its of laughter and love -- **HERE comes GOD**. And **GOD** just wants to live **AMONG** us, and **WITHIN** us, **IF** we will just **FIND** God ROOM, even if it's NOT in the *kataluma*. Yes, **THAT'S** why we're HERE! And **THAT'S** why we're so **JOYFUL** tonight! It's NOT just because our FAMILIES are together! And it's NOT just because little Jesus was born in Bethlehem 2000 years AGO! NO! **WE** are **CELEBRATING** because **GOD** is moving **in**, even TODAY; because **GOD** is pitching a TENT in **OUR** backyard; because **GOD** is sleeping on **our** SOFA-BED; and because **GOD** is coming **HOME** to live **WITH** us and **AMONG** us! Friends: **HOW incredible** is THAT? AS it says with a great GUSH of **JOY** near the END of very LAST book in the Bible, the *Book of Revelation*: ***SEE, the home of GOD is among MORTALS! GOD will DWELL with them as THEIR God; THEY will be GOD'S people and GOD will be***

WITH them.... (Rev 21:3) Yes friends: **GOD** is coming **HOME!** And **THAT** is something to **CELEBRATE!** **THAT** is **JOY** to the **WORLD: Joy to the world! The Lord IS HOME!** Amen.

(With thanks to William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, October-December, 1999)

Carol: Joy to the World

Let us pray:

Lord Jesus, because WE could not come to YOU, YOU have come to US. Because WE could not find our way HOME, YOU have come to make YOUR home with US. On THIS day, Lord, our JOY is FULL, our HOPE is FULFILLED, and our YEARNING is met in YOUR wondrous grace. For the Word HAS become flesh and dwelt AMONG us full of grace and truth, just as the Bible has promised. THANKS be to God!

Amen.