Sunday December 19, 1982

"THE INNKEEPER IN BETHLEHEM" LUKE 2:1-7

Bethlehem is normally a quiet, peaceful, sleeply little town in the southern part of Palestine in what is called Judea. My name is Reuben and I own and operate the inn or what today would be called a hotel, in the town of Bethlehem.

As you enter the village from the north side, the inn is located just off the main road that runs through town. Being an innkeeper is a fairly profitable business especially since our town is on one of the main routes running north and south in Palestine. We are so situated that it is a normal and natural stopping place for travelers.

My inn is not a large one and of course there are times when there is not much business, slackseasons, when there are relatively few travelers coming our way. However, there was one time in particular when business for us was exceptionally good. The Roman Emporer, Caesar Augustus had decreed that all people in the vast Roman Empire should be enrolled, that is, a census be taken for the purpose of adequate taxation. To accomplish this enrollment, he had further ordered that all people must return to their home town for the census.

Bethlehem is a very old village and thus many people were descendents of the town and had to return for the census. This meant that the inn business would be very good. When the deadline for the census was approaching, people began pouring into our town from all over the area. I wished I had owned ten inns. It wasn't long before our modest inn was filled each night. We had even put extra cots in many of the rooms and also in the storage rooms. I wanted to make all the money that I could during this boom season.

But there was one particular night during this time that I shall never forget. Just when the inn was completely filled, about 9:00 in the evening, a man knocked on my door. I opened it and peered out into the darkness. There I saw a young man, a common ordinary sort of person, dressed rather poorily and shivering in the cool night air.

Then I noticed a young woman, also rather poorly dressed. They both looked extremely tired and a bit worried. The man said his name was Joseph and that he and his wife, Mary, had been traveling for three days and needed a place to spend the night. He said they were from Nazareth.

He asked if there was a room for them in my inn and I almost laughed at him. "We were filled up hours ago," I told him. "There's no room left." "Don't you even have a spare cot that we could put somewhere in a corner, just so my wife will be able to get some rest?" he asked. "No," I told him again, this time quite emphatically. "There's no room in my inn." "But my wife is going to have a baby soon; probably within a few hours."

"I'm sorry," I said again, "there's no room here." I could see that they looked like rather poor people anyway and probably wouldn't have enough money to pay for the room. In fact, if he had offered me enough money, I might have given them my own room. If the money is enough, room can always be found.

It was clear that Joseph was very concerned about his wife and wasn't ready to give up yet. "Didn't I know of some kind of shelter, any kind, that they could use for the night?" he asked me again. Finally, in desperation and to get rid of them, I told them they might be able to get some shelter in the small stable behind the inn. It was actually owned by me. After all, I told myself, a stable is good enough for these country people anyway. They can move one of the cattle out of the stalls if they want and take its place. So they left and headed toward the stable and I went back to my inn to my warm and comfortable room.

I had forgotten all about the couple in a short time and went to bed myself. After being asleep for about three hours, I suddenly heard a knock on my door. Wearily getting out of bed, I opened the door and noticed a young boy. Excitedly, he told me that the woman in the stable had given birth just a few minutes ago. Being a naturally curious person, I hurried toward the cave where the stable was.

By the time I arrived, I could hear the baby crying. As I looked in, I COULD see that both mother and child were all right. What sight! I don't think that I shall ever

forget the look of joy and beauty on the mother's face. They had made a bed for the baby in the manger and what a beautiful baby it was. As I looked through a crack in the wall at the scene, (I was too ashamed to go in), it seemed to me that there was something different about this child; there was some unique quality about the baby that I hadn't seen before, and yet it was just an ordinary baby. At the same time, I sensed that I was in the presence of a holy event. It was a feeling I had not had before. I wanted very much to be closer to the baby.

Yet I could not bring myself to go into the stable. Maybe I was feeling guilty for turning the couple away. But I couldn't leave and go back to the inn. I was glued to the spot and I had a premonition that something unusual had occured this night, but I DIDN't know what it was. So I stood there hiding and watching the baby and his parents through the crack in the wall.

After about an hour or longer, another strange event took place. I noticed a group of shepherds from the surrounding hill country coming to the stable. They said they had come to see the new born baby. But why? They surely had seen babies before. And how had they known there was a newly born baby in this particular place? Who told them? Then I noticed the shepherds were kneeling before the manger and the baby. They were worshipping as if God was somehow present.

Then I heard the shepherds tell Mary and Joseph about a vision announcing the wonderful event to them. They said a voice told them that this baby was Christ the Lord, the Messiah so long promised, the Son of God, the Savior of the world. I could hardly believe what I was hearing. The Messiah! I wasn't what you would call a religious person, although I was a Jew and attended the local synagogue.

But all of us Jews, religious or not, recalled enough of the Old Testament to know that a Messiah had been promised and long sought by all of us. Some of the prophets had even suggested that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. But we had not paid much attention to that. How could a baby be the Messiah? A baby in a manger?

Then, deep within me, I knew it must be true! And I too, fell down and worshipped God right where I was. I was still too ashamed to enter the stable and face the parents.

If I had only known! I would've found room somewhere in my inn. I would've given the family my room. But how could I have known? Why didn't someone tell me? Why didn't Joseph tell me that the child Mary was going to have was something special?

But on second thought, would I have believed it if someone had told me? Would I have believed Joseph or Mary? No, I probably would've thought them crazy. I would've laughed and told them as I had before--there is no room in my inn.

Would I have believed that God would choose such a common ordinary woman to have the Christ born into this world? I remembered that when Joseph and Mary had come to my door, I had looked on them with a kind of contempt--the stable was good enough for them. Most of us look down on some people. Surely you've noticed that too. We all too often make snap judgments about people and in the process misjudge them.

What a fool I was! In a sense, God had knocked on my door and I had shut God out. Since that time I've often thought of how often we human beings shut our minds as quickly as I shut the door of the inn that night. We shut the door to new possibilities and say, "It can't be."

As I have thought about my mistake over the years I have come to see it as a kind of parable of all human beings. "No room!" I had almost shouted to Joseph. "No room for you and your kind here." "No room for the Christ," I might as well have said.

It happens over and over again. People say, "My life is all filled up. There is no room for something new and fresh. Years later, I heard that this child who had now become an adult said that one day many people will be surprised. They will think they have been serving Christ and know where he is, but will have missed him, will have shut him out, and still others will be surprised to find that they have been serving him and welcoming him all along without even being aware of it. "In as much as you have

done it unto one of the least of these my brothers and sisters, you have done it unto me."

Also remember that I didn't shut Christ out on purpose. There was no room because other guests arrived first and the inn was filled. Sometimes our lives get filled up in the same way and there is no room for God. We don't shut God out on purpose, but to make room for God something else would have to go, and we don't want to do that. It's easier, we think, to go on functioning in the same old way. It's easier to say, "No room here; no room in my inn."

And I've thought of other excuses for not making room that night so long ago. After all, I didn't know he was coming. There was no advance registration. But now I know that is not a valid excuse. I could've given them my own room. Sometimes for the most important events in our lives, there is no advance notice. We have to make room when they happen.

I've thought about it a lot over these years since that first Christmas when I made my mistake. Unfortunately, I see the same mistake being made over and over again. We human beings seem to habitually repeat the scene at my inn in Bethlehem.

Yet how marvelous a change a little hospitality can make! Whenever we make room in our lives for new ideas, our lives can be utterly transformed. I think we can see much of the history of the world through the eyes of my mistake at the inn--INHOSPITALITY!

Think of it. What if we human beings did not so habitually repeat the scene of Bethlehem? What if when saviors come in any realm we did not meet them with our impassive refusal of welcome? I am told that Thales first foretold a solar eclipse, the one in 585 B.C. and the ancient Greeks knew the world was round. But it took people many many years to welcome such new ideas. Has there ever come to mankind a new and saving idea without hearing the cry--No room!

Much of the tragedy in our world is caused by the impassive and stubborn refusal to welcome the saviors of the world. And the saviours have not been lacking, not in science, not in music, not in social justice, not in spiritual faith

Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr. Susan B. Anthony Gandhi,

and life. They have come, but whether it be Galileo or someone else, or our Lord himself, with what impenetrable inhospitality we have refused them.

The saviours come and they will continue to come--God sends them. God works in many ways and through many kinds of people and movements. It is we, the masses of the people who continually cry--No room! I am told on good authority that here in America, no more than 100 years ago, one of your school boards said, "You are welcome to use the school house or to debate all proper questions, but such things as railroads and telegraphs are impossibilities and rank infidelity. You cannot talk about such things in our school house."

That may be ridiculous, we think. When however, we consider the situation of the world today, this is no laughing matter. I notice that in your world, you are moving into situations in economic life and international relationships, and nuclear arms so unprecedented that old formulas and old assumptions are inadequate to save the day, just as old oxcarts cannot handle modern transportation. Welcome new ideas! Debate them! Discuss them! Some will not be useful. Others may be a saving -possibility. Don't just slam the door and say--no room here.

What I fear most is that in your time new ideas will continue to come, new social outlooks, new ways of working for and finding peace, and because your minds are filled with old ideas, old assumptions, old prejudices, old forms of patriotism, you will cry -- No room, just as I cried, No room, many, many years ago.

God never gives up in entering our world and our lives. God will enter this world and your lives in many ways. Make room for God in your private lives and in the world at large. Christ still comes to the inn. Only you can change the outcome. Make room for him. And don't be surprised in the many ways and forms in which Christ enters the world and your life.

I did enter the stable on that first Christmas after the shepherds had gone. And I found there a warm welcome. I was not shut out as I had shut Mary and Joseph out earlier. I was received with joy. God never forces his way into our lives, but God does stand at the door and knock.

All we have to do is open the door and let God in, and then we have to make room in our lives as well. Amen.