

## “No Vacancy”

Sermon on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2023

Dear church,

“No vacancy!” We know these signs from the summer shore season. Hotels in Cape May, Virginia Beach, Cape Cod greet us with this message. Busy beach towns are booked well in advance, hotel rooms sold out, and only the least desirable rentals are still available at the last minute.

A few years ago, we traveled to Germany in the month of December for a wedding. We stopped in a small city in the mountains north of where I grew up, sitting down for a bite to eat. It was surprisingly quiet in this tourist town. I talked to the owner and asked politely whether they were expecting a good season for Christmas. He looked at me, shook his head, laughed, and said, “Winterberg (the name of the town) is always booked solid for Christmas. Not even God could get a room here!”

It was an interesting comment, especially since we know what happened in the Nativity story when Mary and Joseph had to get creative: a manger instead of a bed, animal warmth instead of an oven, prickly straw, odors that aren’t so pleasant to the human nostrils. A barn then, let’s look at the positive... at least a roof over the head, shelter, protection. God, when we are caught in an emergency, we can’t be picky!

This is of course a story about God’s birth, and God’s outsized heart for the poor, counter-cultural attention to the marginalized. Every shepherd in the Nativity story reminds us of it, as does Mary’s emergency delivery in a shack. The prophetic statement can’t be missed: pay attention to those who are on the margins. Make room for them. The gospel is big enough for them. The world is big enough for them. Certainly, God’s love is big enough for them... And salvation – the very big word that haunts through the Christian gospels – SALVATION cannot be experienced without us seeing God in the least of our brothers and sisters. I am pretty sure that’s the core message of the Nativity.

This is also a story about human resiliency. How resilient are we when all the doors are shut, when we are left out of the mainstream, down in the dirt, metaphorically or literally speaking? Isn’t the holy family modeling for us what it means to be resilient, the ability to believe and adapt, to hang in there and find a way? Resilience! As a church in the early 21st century we know what that’s about. Many human hearts and public rooms are closed for religion. Skepticism, bad experiences from the past, convenience, assumptions make it difficult for people to open their hearts and lives to the gospel. And so, we go around and ask, “Do you have a little barn in your soul?” “Do you have a tiny closet for God?” Maybe that’s where baby Jesus will be born.

Not even God could get a room in Bethlehem, the city of David, a place with sacred history and Jewish pedigree. Interesting, isn't it? In the world that we know, in the world that we read about on our devices and in our old-fashioned papers, some people always get what they want, no emergency required. The special boxes in the football stadiums, the table at the trendy restaurant that is sold out months in advance, the premiere performance of a famous musical... Most ordinary people don't get tickets for those kinds of things, but the human incarnations of fame and money, the so-called stars, manage to get in. Do you think a guestroom in a crowded city will be a problem for Taylor Swift... considering what she's charging for the Era's Tour???

Yet in the Christmas story God couldn't even get a tiny guest room in Bethlehem when Mary's belly was starting to contract, the poor woman hoping for a decent place to give birth. Maybe a bed! "God," Mary prayed, "I would like to have a cot where I can lay down!" If it had been Herod, the king of Judah or Cesar, the Emperor of Rome looking for a room, it would have been arranged. But the mere mortals of this story, humans at the margin of society, survival artists, no-names, encountered this sign everywhere: No vacancy! No room! We are full and we have our hands full! Go elsewhere!

The image of a busy town, hosting maybe double, maybe triple of its normal population because of the census, the image of "no vacancies" speaks to us in 2023. Most people's lives are occupied and overflowing. "There is no room in my schedule, not even for God. I am too busy!" people might say today when God is knocking on their door. And God, roundly rejected, turns away from our distracted souls and finds himself someone who has a little bit of space, a broom closet, the tiniest of inner rooms to host the heavenly guest. God doesn't need much to come into our lives, the story assures us, but he needs an opening and maybe the straw of your attention. And in that liminal space of your curiosity about the deeper mysteries of life, baby Jesus can be, will be born for you. So, keep your heart open, at least a crack. And maybe put a different sign out there that God can see when he knocks on your door. How about this sign... "We're open!" "Guests are welcome!" – that would be a start. That would be a very good start to the new year. Merry Christmas!

Amen.