

“ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS: TO BELONG”

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Luke 2:1-5

A few years back, I took a road trip out to Ohio with family and friends to attend a light opera festival at Wooster College. It was a great trip! We had a wonderful time attending shows, sightseeing, going out to eat, and shopping. By the end of the week, we were beat, and then, of course, it was time to drive back home. On the way out, we had stopped in Pittsburgh and stayed there overnight, because my brother Adam and his family were living there at the time. On the way home though, we weren't planning to stop there, we actually didn't have exact plans about where we would stop – we'd just go about halfway and call it a night.

So, the last day came, we saw a show in the early afternoon I think, and then got in the car to start home. We drove and drove, stopped for dinner, and then others in the car suggested that we start looking for a hotel. Not me, though. “No,” I said, “let's keep going for a little while more.” They groaned, but I was driving, so “sorry about your luck.”

I drove and drove and it got later and later, and they were getting antsy. So finally, long after we should have stopped for the night, I pulled up to a hotel. One of the others got out and went into the lobby, only to come back moments later with the news, “No room in the inn.”

“Oh well, we'll find someplace else,” I cheerily replied. Back on the road. A little while later, we stopped again, I pulled up in front of another hotel, that person ran inside again, and when she came out, I could tell by her face we were in trouble. “No room in the inn.” Turns out there was a biker convention in the area, and every hotel for miles and miles around was chocked full of bikers.

I'm not sure of the name of the hotel we eventually ended up staying in – but I can tell you this – it was hours later that we found it – we were dead tired, and it turns out, we were only two hours from home!

Looking back on it, that's a funny story – but there was nothing funny about the story we heard in the gospel lesson - Mary, nine months pregnant, and her devoted and no-doubt terribly worried Joseph by her side, making a treacherous journey to Bethlehem. You may not have realized it, but as a source I read this week reminded me, “it is roughly 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. According to Google Maps, it would take 34 hours to travel it on foot, not counting stops for rest.” (Christian Century, “Living the Word,” Tom Long, 12/10/14)

One hundred miles riding on the back of a colt while fully pregnant; one hundred miles walking next to the one you love worrying about her welfare and the life of the unborn child; one hundred miles through dusty and rough and dangerous terrain; one hundred miles going to deal with government paperwork; one hundred miles. It would be like us walking from Elkton to Alexandria, Virginia.

We can't begin to imagine their fatigue – not just physical fatigue, but emotional as well. They had to be absolutely, positively drained, and all they wanted was to lie down and rest. Just lie down and rest.

But we know what happened. There was no place for them. Scripture doesn't tell us how many doors upon which they knocked, but we do know that Bethlehem had its own version of a biker convention going on – the city was chocked full to the brim with people coming to register for the census. There just wasn't any place for them.

In a literal sense, this story is about a hotel room, if you will, or the lack thereof. But the story goes much deeper, I think. Underneath the surface, is the story of wanting to know that there's a place for us in the world, that we matter, that we belong. We yearn for that, as the choir reminded us so beautifully last week, in that first song in the cantata called "The Yearning."

We yearn to know that we have a place in the world, that we matter, that we belong. Sadly, the doors of Bethlehem were not the only ones that shut Jesus out – it happened over and over again throughout his life and ministry. Before he was even a few days old, his parents had to take him home a different way – by way of Egypt – because Herod was, even then, trying to destroy him.

Later on, in his ministry, doors were closed (literally and symbolically) because Jesus was too controversial, he spent time with undesirables and those deemed uncleaned, he challenged convention, he upset the apple cart. Why, even the people of his own hometown threatened to throw him off a cliff, because they didn't like what he was saying and doing!

And, in the end, at the end of his life, the world had no room for him, for his kind of love and life, it was too threatening to the powers that be, so they tried him on trumped-up charges and put him to death. And then, even then, there was no room for him – he had to be buried in a borrowed tomb.

Now, none of us will know the kinds of things that Jesus knew, the kind of rejection that he knew – but all of us, in one way or another, know what it's like to want to belong, to matter, to have our place in the world. And probably, most of us know what it's like to not feel that way.

One person wrote about it this way: "Do you know what it's like to feel out of place? (she writes) Have you ever walked into a room and felt uncomfortable? Or maybe you can remember, or imagine, standing with a cafeteria tray in your hands and realizing you have no idea which table to sit down at. Maybe it's an experience

of walking into a cocktail party and noticing that everyone else seems to know each other. Or you show up at an event in your finest suit, only to discover that you're the only one who didn't know it was a jeans and sandals affair."

She continues: "There is nothing easy or comfortable about feeling as though you don't belong. And it's hard enough to walk into a room full of strangers and feel out of place; it's even more painful to walk into a room of people you know and feel out of place there. To feel like the square peg in a round pegboard. To feel isolated by invisible circumstances, depression or illness. To feel as though you just don't fit."

She goes on to talk about what it's like to go away to summer camp, or on a business trip, or to travel in a country where you don't speak the language – and just get to the point where - "I just want to go home." (On-line, "Longing and Belonging," velveteenrabbi.blogs.com)

I can't imagine that there's anyone in this room who, at one time or another, has not felt that longing. "I just want to go home." "I want to belong." "I want to have a place where I'm accepted." At one time or another, most of us have been left standing outside in the cold - like Mary, like Joseph, like Jesus - where there was no room in the inn.

So we dare not stop reading the scripture, because those are not the final words of the story. We know that Mary and Joseph found a place to lay their head and where she gave birth that night – in a stable - but more than that, we know that because of what happened that night, Jesus the Savior coming into the world, none of us would ever ultimately be left out again – none of us.

For when God sent His Son into the world, He said in a powerful way to each and every one of us, "You matter. You belong to me. I love you and you always have a place. You will never be alone."

In all those times that I talked about in Jesus' life – as a baby when his parents escaped through Egypt, as a man when he faced such opposition, at his death when he was wrongfully executed – in all those times Jesus carried on with his head held high because he knew God was with him. He wasn't walking alone, he wasn't in ministry alone, he wasn't risking his neck alone, he wasn't suffering alone, he wasn't dying alone. God was with him – he mattered, he had a place in God's heart, he belonged to God.

And it is the same with each of us. No matter how the world, the people around us, or we ourselves, put up barriers and boundaries, get shut out, feel all alone – no matter how that happens, it doesn't matter, because we belong to God, we have a place in his heart, we matter to him, he is with us always. We don't have to yearn to matter – we matter because we are God's. We belong to him and we matter so much to him that he sent Jesus for us and for our salvation.

Did you ever see the movie “Toy Story”? The stars of the movie were toys, and two of the stars were Woody (who was a plush toy cowboy) and Buzz Lightyear (a toy astronaut). At one point in the movie, Woody shouts at Buzz, “You’re not a space ranger! You’re an action figure – a child’s plaything!”

After trying and failing to fly, Buzz realizes the truth of Woody’s statement. Grief-stricken and disillusioned, Buzz hangs his head in resignation, declaring, ‘I’m just a stupid, little, insignificant toy.’

Woody sees what his words have done (they’ve closed the door on Buzz, shut him out, if you will, left him wondering if he even mattered). So he tries to comfort Buzz by reminding him of the boy who owns them both. “Buzz,” he says. “You must not be thinking clearly. Look over in that house, there’s a kid who thinks you’re the greatest, and it’s not because you’re a space ranger, it’s because you’re his.”

At that, Buzz lifts his foot and sees a label affixed to the bottom of his shoe, and there in black permanent marker is the name of the little boy to whom he belongs. Seeing that, Buzz breaks into a smile and takes on a new determination. (On-line, “Belonging to God,” Preaching Today)

“Look over there, there’s a kid who thinks you’re the greatest, and it’s not because you’re a space ranger, it’s because you’re his.”

My friends, look over there, there’s Someone who thinks you’re the greatest, and it’s not for any other reason, than that you’re His – and that someone is God. In God, is your home. To God, you belong, you matter. With God, you are never alone.

How do you know that? Because in a dry, dusty town that said it had no room, into a stable was born the Savior of the world, God’s gift of love to you – a gift that said “I love you so much I am sending my Son that you might have life – full, abundant, eternal life. The world can do a lot of things to you, but it can never take that away from you.”

My friends, Mary and Joseph may not have had a room in a hotel, but they had room in the heart of God, and from that day forward they were faithful and faced all of life knowing that He was with them, and that, all would be well. May you, this day, this Christmas, remember that too. You matter, you belong, you have a home in the heart of God, and Jesus holds the key.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Amen.