



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“TOO CROWDED FOR CHRIST”

Scripture Lessons: Micah 5:2-5(a); Luke 2:1-20

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, December 27, 2020
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. But the angel said to them, ‘Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord. This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.’ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!’

When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, ‘Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.’ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

When I was in high school, I worked at the front desk of the Quality Suites Hotel, just off of Montague Avenue in North Charleston. As front desk clerks, it was our job to welcome the guests and make them feel at home and comfortable. It was also our job to listen to their joys and concerns, and to make things right, if there was a need. And normally we could do that – we

could make things right – though not always, especially when we had to turn someone away, which it happened more often than you might think.

Sometimes people would just arrive late in the night and you could tell they've been traveling all day; you could see the weariness all over them, but if they hadn't made a reservation, it was often the case that we didn't have a room. Of course, we would always try to help them find accommodations, but if it happened to be the weekend of the Cooper River Bridge Run or Spoleto or the Southeastern Wildlife Exposition, we'd be hard-pressed to find a room for them anywhere in town.

I suppose that experience as serving as a front desk clerk has contributed to a little bit of a soft spot that I have in my heart for the innkeeper that we read about in this morning's New Testament Lesson. I mean, the poor guy shows up in every Christmas pageant, and he was even here with his family at our Journey to Bethlehem pilgrimage on Christmas Eve – and seemingly always, his brief cameo appearance is accompanied by that same single line, that heartbreaking line: "No room!" Well, he only had so many, right? And the census was being taken, Bethlehem was probably overrun with people who considered that city to be their ancestral home. Surely the innkeeper couldn't have been expected to accommodate everyone, right? And though he did provide something, well, history has always looked upon that stable as a none too gracious alternative.

Just before Christmas, I had the opportunity to visit the Betty Noble Circle as they had their annual Christmas program. It's something I look forward to every year, and every year I start out by reading a Christmas story, usually a children's story! A story that might resonate not only with those who are present, but also with those children and grandchildren with whom we may have contact over the Christmas season.

This year I selected the story entitled, *The Innkeeper*, by John Piper, which presents us with an imaginative look at the innkeeper's life many years after that first Christmas Eve. The precise setting of the story is just two weeks before Jesus makes his decisive and altogether redemptive journey to Jerusalem, where he would give up his life as an atonement for our sins. But first, Jesus sought out the innkeeper – there was another debt to be paid, you might say. John Piper creatively and yet reverently pondered the very heavy price that the innkeeper may have paid for having allowed the Christ-child to stay in his inn; indeed, in the story, the innkeeper's life had never been the same thanks to Herod's brutal reaction to the birth of Jesus. At the end of the story, Jesus introduces himself as that child who stayed there many years before and thanked the innkeeper for the role that he played. Jesus went on to talk about the innkeeper's family and the glad and joyous reunion that would one day be theirs as the result of what He was about to do.

That story brought to mind a question that I've often pondered myself: Did the innkeeper ever find out who he turned away that night? I sure hope so! I heard another imaginative perspective some years ago, the innkeeper's place just outside the city of Jerusalem and very near the place called Golgotha, they pictured the innkeeper looking at Mary, crying at the foot of the cross, and saying to himself... "What is it about this man that has everyone so energized? And that woman at the foot of the cross, I feel like I've seen her somewhere before?"

Imagine him walking up to a centurion. "Excuse me sir, can you tell me about that man on the cross over there?" "His name is Jesus, and he is from Nazareth, though he was born in Bethlehem." "Bethlehem, you don't say. When was he born there?" "Ah, let me see, it was during the enrollment of Caesar Augustus. I guess that makes him thirty-two or thirty-three."

I'd like to think that, one day, the innkeeper did in fact, find out who he turned away on that cold night many years before. I'd like to think that he was eventually in a position to let Jesus in – to let Him into his heart, that is! Oh, imagine how different things would have been on that first Christmas Eve had the innkeeper actually known who it was that needed a place to stay, that his humble guest was none other than the Messiah, the Lord!

Had the innkeeper known that it was "Emanuel" -- God with us -- who needed a place to stay, surely he wouldn't have allowed far less important people to take priority over him. I mean, knowing what we know, would any of us choose to operate under that philosophy of: "first come, first served?"

Had the innkeeper known who Jesus was, surely he would have expected his coming. He would have planned for it differently. I mean, knowing again what we know, would any of us just go through the motions of making a living, checking people in and out...being otherwise preoccupied with letting the water drip so that the pipes don't freeze?

Ah, had the innkeeper just known that the Savior of the world had drawn near, surely he would have made arrangements for Jesus to stay somewhere other than the stable. Here again, knowing what we know, it is not like any of us would have put Jesus in the back corner of our lives. "No room!" We'd never say that, would we?

An anonymous poet put it like this: "O Little Inn of Bethlehem, how like we are to you. Our lives are crowded to the brim, with this and that to do. We're not unfriendly to the King, we mean well without a doubt; we have no hostile feeling, we merely crowd him out."

Harry Emerson Fosdick put it like this: "The crucial difficulty of Christ's life which denied him the service he longed to render, closed to him the hearts he longed to change and brought him at last to Calvary – was something so simple, so familiar, so little recognized as a tragic evil – so universal among us all, that one almost hesitates to name it – "No room!" I think Fosdick's point to make was that we are the innkeepers of our time, and God knocks at the doors of our lives, and, many people, by God's grace, have already welcomed our Savior inside, but others have not; and, for those in the world today who still wonder about this Christ who knocks, well, there comes to us another story.

A writer from the *Saturday Evening Post* tells us about a man who had a little inn near the railway station in Fargo, North Dakota. He was a poor man, barely able to eke out a living renting only a few rooms here and there to the railway travelers and seasonal overflow of family and friends. He was a simple man, trusting the neighbors of the town when they wanted a room and did not have the money to pay. It was said that he was a poor businessman who failed to take advantage of his opportunities. While other business drew trade with a Merry Christmas spirit that featured mechanical Santa's nodding and grinning, and windows bright with trains and dolls, a small

window in his narrow little wooden lobby didn't show any of that, instead it showed a cheap lithographed picture, faintly lit by two small candles. And the face on the picture, it wasn't happy. It wasn't a picture of the baby in the manger, the one that we usually see displayed at Christmastime. Instead it was a man's face with downcast eyes and a crown of thorns upon its head, and it clashed with the bright festive atmosphere commonly associated with Christmas.

But shoppers who stopped before that picture on Christmas Eves or even cold, bitter Dakota blizzards, and when they looked into that dimly lit window, well, they never forgot what they saw. In the midst of all the competing displays that went up and down the street, this display asked: "Whose birthday is it?" And the picture gave the answer -- an answer which pointed to a cradle in the shadow of the cross.

Friends, the Christ, who was born, and lived, and died, and, yes, who rose again, He is the same Christ who knocks on the doors of our lives even today; and, to be clear, it is not a guest room that our Lord requires...it is our room...it is our hearts, for that is where the Lord, our God has chosen to reside. So let us pray that we have since learned how to flip that script; let not that most infamous line be ours; let not those words "No room" prove that we are either too busy or that our lives are too crowded for Christ; because, that Innkeeper, he didn't know who Jesus was...but, Friends, we do, and that should make all the difference in the world!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.