

# Room for the Child

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*Text: Luke 2:1-14*

“She ... laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” Jesus’ first resting place, his first shelter, his first home was not in the inn, in the lodgings where the out-of-town guests stayed, but with the animals. The manger may not have been in a stable or a barn—in the first century, many dwellings included space for people and animals under one roof—but wherever it was, it wasn’t the proper place for a human child to lay his head. In the Christmas story, the manger and the inn are opposites. The one is a place of comfort and dignity, the other a slapdash accommodation of necessity, like sacking out in someone’s garage. And yet when the angels give the shepherds a sign to look for, to know that God is at work, it’s the manger. The savior, the Messiah is born, they say, and you’ll know we’re telling the truth when you see a child wrapped up and lying in a manger.

How is it that Jesus came to rest in a manger? The story only tells us that there was “no place for them” in the inn. No place for them. That’s an ambiguous phrase, isn’t it? It might mean that it was physically impossible to house the Holy Family that night. It might mean that all the decent lodgings were crammed full of travelers in town for the census. That could be. But try this sometime, when you’re waiting at a busy restaurant: look for an empty seat at an occupied table and see what happens if you sit down. You’d expect to hear someone say to you, “I’m sorry, but there’s no place for you here.” And they wouldn’t mean that there’s literally no physical room. The message they’d be conveying to you is that there’s no place *for you*. And you’d deserve that—it is impolite and inconvenient to impose your company on those who don’t want it, just because you’re impatient.

On the other hand, you’d think a mother and father with a newborn child, just hours old, might elicit some compassion and understanding. You’d think one or more guests would have thought to give up their place, to make room for this little child, to forego their right to the lodgings they had claimed first so that this exhausted family might have some relief. But you’d be wrong, because, as the story goes, the Son of God spent his first night on earth not in the inn, where there was no place offered to him, but in a manger. It is a profound failure of hospitality. Our callousness, our lack of compassion for the vulnerable stranger, put Jesus in the manger. Jesus begins his life in this world pushed to the outside, to the margins, because there is no place for him.

But he’s not alone there. The shepherds out in the fields were despised by the townsfolk. They were dirty, they were shifty, they were probably thieves. In the Babylonian Talmud it says that the testimony of a shepherd is inadmissible in court, because of their low character. The word of a shepherd wasn’t good enough. And yet these are the people the angels entrusted with the good news of Jesus’ birth, with the message of peace on earth for those whom God looks on with favor. There was no room for them in the inn either. If the shepherds had shown up in town looking for shelter, every door would have been slammed in their face. If they had come calling at the inn

for the baby Jesus, if there had been room for the child there, he would have been inaccessible to the outcasts, to those on the outside looking in. Jesus came among us as a stranger and an outcast, to make a home with strangers and outcasts. The fact that Jesus was pushed aside like this may be a sign of our world's cruelty and indifference, but God made it a sign of God's own radical acceptance and love. It's a shame for Jesus or any child to be laid in a manger—or abused, or abandoned, or mistreated in any way. But at the same time, it's an astounding, wonderful miracle that the Christ-child, the Son of God, brought God's presence and glory to such a dirty place, to such despised people. Christ in the manger is God's judgment on us. Christ in the manger is God's grace for us.

And throughout his life, Jesus continued to live on the margins. He sat down to eat with hated tax collectors who collaborated with the Roman state. He stopped to speak with kindness and understanding to a woman of the Samaritan faith. He touched unclean lepers, and he healed them. And he breathed his last on a cross, executed between two common criminals. When Jesus came to be with us, he always meant to lay his head in the manger. He came to bring God's grace and blessing to those who, like the shepherds, could find no room at the inn.

There is a respectable image of us, a manicured and curated presentation of ourselves that we are pleased to write about in our Christmas letters or post about on Facebook. In this carefully tended portrait, there's harmony in our families, satisfaction with our work, and never an echo of self-doubt or anxiety over money, work, health, or relationships. This projection is welcome in the inn of our imagination.

But there's also a part of us that lives, as it were, out in the fields, dusty and alone. It's the part of us that carries hurts and regrets from many years ago, the part us that isn't really sure we're going to be OK. It's the part of us that's missing someone we deeply love this Christmas. The part of us that wishes desperately that things could change but doesn't see how they possibly can. It's the part that wonders whether God has forgotten us, or maybe is punishing us for something we did wrong. The part that wonders whether we could ever deserve to be loved and held and accepted. This is the self that, on our good days, we push to the edge of our thoughts, because there's no room in an unforgiving world like ours for a self like this.

But the good news didn't come to the people in the inn. They slept through it, and went on about their business as though nothing happened. The good news came to the shepherds, poor and shoved aside though they might have been. They were the ones whose hearts had room for the Christ child, who rejoiced to find him in a manger, of all places. And the good news—"Do not be afraid! I bring you good news of great joy!"—is for you too. Christ came, a poor wanderer, denied rest and comfort, so that he might live with the poor, the hungry, the outcast, the fearful, the grieving, the guilt-stricken. When Jesus was laid in a manger, he brought God's presence for fearful and hurting and hoping people. And just by itself, that act changed them forever. The shepherds began the night as despised outcasts. They ended as God's trusted messengers, inspiring wonder and amazement in everyone who heard their story.

What will it mean for Christ to lay his head in the hidden and hurting corners of your life? To the brokenhearted he says, "Your broken heart is my home. There is room for me there. I choose to live here. I choose to live with you, my beloved." And it's in this way that a child is born for us. It's in this way that a Son is given to us.

Not in the inn, but the manger—Christ is born! Not for the upstanding citizen, but the sinner—Christ is born! Not in our perfection, but our weakness—Christ is born! Glory to God in the highest! Amen.