

For unto you is born... a Savior. Luke 2:11

NO ROOM IN THE INN (1982)

Bro. Thomas Edward Taggart

Astor Lodge No. 505, Albia, IA

(Luke 2:1-18)

A long time ago, in a small country far away from here, there was a man leading a donkey down a narrow dusty road. It was almost dark, and he still had not reached his destination. He kept glancing over his shoulder to check on his wife who was riding the animal behind him. He could see that she was exhausted from the long journey. Even though she was quite a bit younger than he, this last thirty miles from Jerusalem, where they had camped last night among the other travelers, had been especially hard on her. To make things more complicated, their child could be born at any time. He cursed himself for ever letting Mary talk him into bringing her with him. But she insisted that their son could not be born anywhere but in Bethlehem, the ancestral home of both their families.

As he walked, he recalled the strange events of the past year. He remembered their betrothal, how he had been reluctant to ask for Mary's hand because of the difference in their ages. But he loved this young girl very much and found the courage to confront her father. To his surprise, her parents were in favor of the marriage. They knew that Joseph had a reputation for honesty and was levelheaded and was well established in his trade as the village carpenter, so they knew their daughter would be well taken care of. Besides, they suspected Mary was in love with Joseph too.

They had been very happy, but suddenly a change came over Mary that Joseph could not understand and shortly after she left Nazareth to spend a few months at the home of her cousin Elizabeth. When she returned, she told him the story of how she had been visited by the angel of the Lord, who told her that she would be the mother of the Messiah. It was an unbelievable story, but there was no denying the swelling of her body that was evidence of the growing life within it. At first Joseph didn't believe her. How could his Mary do such a thing? And then try to cover it up with this story about the angel. He had thought it best not to go through with the wedding and to send Mary away somewhere where she could avoid the gossip of the neighbors and the shame. But he loved her so, and he could not imagine going through the rest of his life without her. Then while he was trying to decide what he should do; he had a dream.

He was never one to put much stock in dreams, but this was so real that he wasn't sure that it was a dream. The angel of the Lord had come to him one night and told him that he should take Mary as his wife, that the child she was carrying was the son of God just as she had said, and that he would be called Jesus and would save his people from their sins. It was a staggering thought. The Messiah was soon to be born and he and Mary would be responsible for raising him and teaching him what he needed to know to be a man in this world. So, Mary and Joseph were wed.

Then came the news of the census. The Roman Emperor wanted to make sure he was getting the right amount of tax money out of his subjects, so he sent out an order that everyone in the Empire must register. To do this Joseph had to travel to the town from which his family originated. Since he traced his ancestry back to King David, he had to travel to Bethlehem, a distance of more than seventy miles. At first, he was not going to take Mary with him. He felt that such a long trip would be too hard on her in her condition. She was nearing the end of the ninth month of her pregnancy so the baby could be born at any time. What if she should go into labor on the road? And the roads were dangerous. There could be robbers. But Mary had insisted on going with him. She reminded him of the well-known prophecy that the Messiah would be born in Bethlehem. She was confident that God would see that they got there safely. So, against his better judgement and after a tearful goodbye to her parents, they set off together on the long journey to Bethlehem.

His train of thought was broken by the clatter of horses on the road behind them. It was a Roman patrol returning to the garrison after a day's mission. He barely had time to get his donkey with its precious cargo off the road before the riders thundered past. He stood there choking on the dust raised by the horses' feet as he watched them disappear around a bend in the road. Like almost everyone in Israel, he hated the Romans and what they had done to his homeland. He thought of the widely circulated idea that when the Messiah came, he would set everything straight and drive the Romans from the land. But then he turned to make sure that Mary was all right and possibly for the first time the thought struck home. The Messiah was coming!

It was completely dark by the time they reached the outskirts of the town. Only the twinkling of the stars in the cold sky lit their way as they moved through the dark streets. Since Bethlehem was a small town, it had only one inn and it was not hard to find. As they neared it Joseph began to see more people, travelers like him, who had come for the census. They were huddled around small fires in the street, their belongings piled under makeshift lean-tos. Upon seeing all the people Joseph began to wonder if they would be able to find a room in the inn with the comforts to which they had been looking forward all day.

As he tied his animal to a post in front of the inn, he could hear noise of the people inside and the smell of food coming to him on the cool night air reminded him that they had not eaten anything but a few dried dates since early that afternoon. He looked at Mary perched on top of their belongings. She was dozing but he could tell from the expression on her face that she was in considerable discomfort. What a woman his young bride was! She had never once complained on the whole long journey from Nazareth. She always has a word of encouragement, laughing, joking, and there was always a smile on her face when she thought he was watching her. But when she wasn't aware of him watching, he had seen the pain and exhaustion in her face, and he knew how much she was really suffering.

She was startled by the touch of his hand on hers but smiled that sweet smile of hers. "Are we here already," she joked? That cheered him up a little and he smiled back.

His knock on the door was gruffly met by a man with a harassed expression on his face, obviously the innkeeper. "I need lodgings for myself and my wife," he told the man.

"I have no more room," was the reply. "Don't you know that the city is full of people who have come to enroll for the census?"

"Yes," Joseph replied, "but we have come long way, and we need some place to stay."

"I'm sorry," said the man, "I just don't have any rooms left. Why don't you camp along the street or in the field at the edge of town like the others?"

The thought of spending another night camped out with the baby due so soon lent a tone of desperation to Joseph's voice. "But my wife is going to have a baby," he said. "Couldn't you please find something?"

The innkeeper's expression softened a bit but still his answer was, "I'm sorry, I just don't have any more room." And with that Joseph found the door shut in his face.

As he turned from the door back to the crowded room, the innkeeper thought about the many people he had talked to in the last week. Although he objected to the census as much as any of his countrymen, he was going to make a handsome profit from all the people it brought to his door. There had been so much business that he and his wife could not handle it all and he had to hire more help. He looked around the room at the throng of people. There were people from all regions of the country, as well as the usual crowd of boisterous Roman soldiers. He had turned away many. Why did this couple seem different? He would really like to help those two outside, what with the baby coming and all, but where would he put them? Then he had an idea. Hurrying outside he found Joseph still talking to Mary, trying to decide what to do next.

"Wait," he called, his voice much less harsh than when he first addressed Joseph. "There is a stable out behind the inn. There is plenty of fresh straw for beds, it's warm, and you could be out of the weather there. I'm sorry, but it's the best I can do. You can stay there for a few days. Surely by then there will be a vacancy in the inn. I'll put you at the top of the list and let you know as soon as something is available."

Joseph looked at Mary and she smiled her warm smile and nodded. "O.K.," he said, and leading the donkey, he followed the innkeeper to the back of the inn.

The stable was fairly large and was filled with the animals of the travelers who were staying at the inn. Since lumber for building was scarce in this part of the country, the stable was constructed from a cave in the side of a hill, which was a common practice in Judea.

They found an empty stall and the innkeeper helped Joseph spread fresh straw on the floor. Before he left, he told Joseph, "When you get settled, come up to the kitchen and I'll see that you get something to eat."

After unloading and feeding their donkey, Joseph went up to the inn and brought back their supper of lentil stew. While they ate Mary talked of the long trip, and how lucky they were to have found this place to spend the night. Joseph wasn't sure if she was trying to reassure him, or herself. After they had finished eating, it was late, so they settled down on the straw, put out the lamp and drifted off to sleep in each other's arms.

Joseph rose early the next morning. He wanted to register for the census as soon as possible and also stop at the house of the midwife of which the innkeeper had spoken. But in spite of his early start there was such a large crowd that he spent the entire day waiting in line. By the time he got back to the inn, it was almost supper time. He was glad that Mary had insisted he take something with him to eat. He found her preparing their meal and questioned her about how she was feeling. While he had been waiting to register, he had nothing else to do except think about her and wonder how she was doing. She told him

that the baby would be born very soon now because she had been having pains off and on ever since about noon. But she was feeling fine otherwise.

It was after midnight when Mary woke Joseph. "You had better get the midwife," she told him. "I think it is time." Joseph scrambled into his sandals, and checking Mary one more time, he set off for the house of the midwife. He was glad he had checked with her earlier that day. She would be expecting him to call.

When he got to her house he pounded on her door. It seemed like hours before she answered. He was greeted by the sleepy woman who recognized him. "Oh, it's you already," she said.

"Yes," replied Joseph. "It's time. Please hurry."

"New fathers are always in a hurry," she smiled, "but the baby always comes in its own time. I'll get my things."

When Joseph led her to the stable, she seemed a bit surprised but didn't say anything. She watched Mary for a while occasionally poking and prodding. Then she turned to Joseph and said, "The baby is very near. I want you to go outside and see that no one disturbs us." Now she was aware that the likelihood of anyone coming into the stable at that time of night was extremely rare, but the last thing she needed was an anxious husband peering over her shoulder and getting underfoot.

The time seemed to drag by for Joseph as he kept his lonely vigil outside the stable. He had plenty of time to think. He couldn't help feeling that somehow, he had let Mary down. Bringing her all the way from Nazareth with the baby so close. And when they got here the best place, he could find for them to stay was an old stable. It wasn't a very likely place for the Son of God to be born.

Perhaps they had been wrong. Maybe their baby was not the Messiah after all. Surely God would not send his chosen one into the world from such a place. But what about his dream and Mary's vision? Could they have imagined them? His mind was a whirl of doubts and fears. But mostly his thoughts were of Mary and of the ordeal she must be going through. He prayed to God that she would be all right.

After what seemed like an eternity Joseph was startled by the cry of a baby, his baby! He could wait no longer and rushed into the stable. He was met by the midwife who had a strange expression on her face. "Just a few more minutes," she said. "Then you can go to her. You have a fine healthy son."

When he was finally allowed to go in, Joseph found Mary sitting up holding their child. He thought that he had never seen Mary look so radiantly beautiful. "Are you all right," he asked?

"Yes," she said. "Isn't he wonderful?" She pulled back the coverings so Joseph could see. He was indeed a beautiful baby, perhaps the most beautiful that Joseph had ever seen. Even allowing for the fatherly pride that swelled within his breast, Joseph knew that this was a special child. He had the sweet and compelling look of the newborn, but there was something more. It was a kind of radiance that surrounded him which was felt more than it was seen. Joseph thought that maybe he was seeing more than was actually there because he was the father, but a look at the midwife told him that she felt it too. As she packed her bundle and prepared to leave, she could not take her eyes from the child. She even refused to take the money Joseph offered her as payment for her service.

“No,” she said. “Something special has happened here tonight and just to be a part of it is payment enough.”

“But you must take something,” Joseph insisted. He went to one of their bundles and dug out a small wooden box. It was made of cedar and intricately carved, the best that his hands could produce. “Here, take this,” he told the woman. Reluctantly she put the box in her bag and set off in the direction of her home. In the light that shone from the front of the stable, Joseph could see her turn and look back over her shoulder several times before she disappeared in the darkness.

Mary and Joseph put the baby to sleep in the manger on the fresh straw and settled down themselves. Since they were both very tired, they were soon asleep. Joseph didn’t know how much later he awakened, but it was still dark outside. He had been aroused from his sleep by some noise outside the stable. He crept cautiously to the door and looked out. Several men were standing outside talking among themselves, but Joseph could not hear what they were saying. From the way they were dressed and the staffs they carried; he knew they were shepherds. One of them, who seemed to be the leader, approached the door. Joseph, hidden in the shadows called out, “What do you want?”

The man, obviously startled, stopped and stammered out, “We have come looking for the child. Is this the place? Is he here?”

“What child,” Joseph demanded, “what are you talking about?”

“Well,” the shepherd began slowly, “this may sound very strange, and I wouldn’t blame you if you thought we were crazy. I wouldn’t have believed it myself if I hadn’t seen it with my own eyes. My brothers and I were out with our sheep, just like always. We were gathered around the fire and talking about where we should take the sheep in the morning. The pasture is getting sparse, and we need to move them. All of a sudden, the whole camp was lit up by a light that was as bright as the sun. Let me tell you, we were terrified! But then the angel of the Lord appeared. He told us not to be afraid because he brought good news that was to be for all people. He told us that the Messiah had been born here in the city and that as a sign for us; we would find the baby wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger. Then there seemed to be many angels with him, and they were singing and praising God. They sang ‘Glory to God in the Highest and on earth peace!’ As suddenly as they had come, they were gone, and we decided to come into the city to look for the baby the angel had told us about. Have we come to the right place?”

“Joseph, what is it?” Mary’s voice came from behind him.

“There are shepherds here,” he said. “They claim that the angel of the Lord told them about the baby. They want to see him.”

Mary looked a little puzzled, but she said, “Of course, let them come in.”

Joseph led them back to the stall where the child lay sleeping. When they saw him, they just stood looking on in awed silence. Finally, one of them said, “The Messiah! He has finally come, and we have seen it. Praise the Lord for this wonderful day! What is his name?”

“Jesus,” was Mary’s reply.

By the time the shepherds left the sky was beginning to lighten with the rising of the sun. As they made their way back to their flock, they talked to everyone they met and told them of the visit of the angels and

of the child they had seen. There would be many other visitors come to the stable. Some would come already believing that the child was the Messiah. Others would not believe until they had seen him snuggled safely in his mother's arms. Still others would never believe that this small baby was the long-awaited Messiah. "The Son of God would never come from such a place," they would say. "Can you imagine the Savior of mankind being born in a stable because there was no room for him in the inn?"

But, my friends, this is exactly what happened some nineteen centuries ago. The Savior of mankind was born in a stable because there was no room in the inn. I remember as a small child I used to think that if I had been the innkeeper, I would have found room for the Christ child. I imagine all of us have had similar thoughts at one time or another.

We can't go back in time to that first Christmas long ago and make room in the inn of Bethlehem. But there is an inn in which we can make room right now, this year, this Christmas. It is the inn of our hearts. But, you say, there is always room in your heart for the Christ child at Christmas. Are you sure?

The fast-paced days surrounding Christmas celebration can become very hectic. We can become involved with buying food for the Christmas feast, making sure we have just the right present for each person on our lists, buying and decorating a tree, attending parties, sending cards to friends and relatives, and all the other activities that occupy our time during the holiday season. In doing so we tend to lose sight of the real meaning of Christmas. The significance of this special day seems to get lost in the ribbon and tinsel, the rush of shopping and the baking of special treats. Too often we find, like the innkeeper of long ago, the best we can do is to crowd the Christ child into the stable out back. It is a sad thing in our society that more time is spent concentrating on the gifts that go under our tree than upon the great gift of God.

In closing, I just want to say that we must be careful lest we become so dazzled by the wrappings, bows, and trimmings, that we lose the greatest gift we will ever have. Be sure there is room in the inn of your heart for the Christ child. Remember that tiny baby grew up to become the man whose blood was poured out on the cross as a sacrifice for your sins. And that, no matter how it is told, is the real meaning of the Christmas story!

A Christmas Prayer

Oh Lord, we would ask that the true meaning of this wondrous season be instilled in our hearts and that we open our lives to you and accept your great gift, the gift of your Son, Jesus Christ. As we celebrate his birth into the world let us not forget that in his life, we see the example you would have us follow. In his death on the cross we find salvation, and in his resurrection, we have the promise of eternal life with you. In his name we pray. Amen