

Christmas Eve  
December 24, 2017  
The Rev. Denise Trogdon

## **Prepare Him Room**

On this holy night, let every heart prepare him room, Amen.

On November 16, 2017 in the little town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, that is, a group of social advocates petitioned a local zoning board for permission to operate a permanent shelter for homeless families. Previously, a network of local churches harbored those sojourners, one week at a time. But this system was difficult to navigate and when small churches would fill to capacity, families would be turned away into the bitter elements.

Neighbors and business owners flocked to the meeting to oppose the shelter, citing it would be dangerous to have vagrants lingering in their neighborhoods. Businesses would be negatively impacted by parking shortages, they claimed. On any given night, over 700 people are homeless in Lehigh Valley, where Bethlehem resides. Yet there is no room at the inn. I wonder, if Jesus came to our door, perhaps a little disheveled, humbly seeking shelter and food, would we welcome him?

In another Bethlehem, at another time, a young homeless family wandered the streets looking for a place to rest, but they were turned away. Luke's gospel notes that in the time of Jesus' birth, Caesar Augustus decreed that a census would be taken. All had to be registered for taxes and military draft. Despite Mary's time being near, they travelled to Bethlehem, Joseph's hometown.

The Roman Empire ruled through wealth and military force. While great cities were built and the empire expanded, conditions were oppressive for those of little means. Imagine that exhausted, dislocated couple searching for shelter. How dark their world seemed with no safe harbor. A stable would have to suffice.

The scripture skips over the conditions they faced and the hours of Mary's labor and takes us right to the babe in a manger. We envision a sentimental tableau of a silent and holy night. Rather, it was an earthy scene of pain and perhaps desperation, as the baby was born in a barn. It is fitting that this one who would feed us for generations was laid in a feeding trough. God's point was clear: God incarnate came not in power and might but as a vulnerable baby, to show us the world was to be different.

The shepherds were the first to know, those unwashed herders who lived on the margins. On the socio-economic ladder, shepherds were just a rung above outcasts. A great light shone and the angel said, "Do not be afraid, I bring you good news of great joy. To you is born this day, a savior who is the Messiah, the Lord." The incarnate God did not show up in the temple. The angel's announcement did not go to political leaders of the empire. God chose unlikely characters to fulfill the plan.

So this story invites us not to a scene of candlelit carols and the warmth of family, but to the fields of the isolated, the disenfranchised, the forgotten. Jesus is born to the people living under the bridge. Jesus is born to the desolate heart. Jesus shows up at the doors of our own wilderness or grief. Even when we have given up on God, God does not give up on us. Jesus is born in those moments when we no longer have all the answers. Perhaps this is when we make room in our hearts.

When Craig Rennebohm was called to the emergency room as a chaplain, he had no idea that his life was about to change, in an encounter with a homeless man named Franklin. When Craig entered the room, Franklin grabbed hold of his hand and desperately cried, "tell me someone cares." Craig gently met his eyes with truth and whispered, "someone cares." In the space between them the tenderness of God was made manifest in the simple reach of a human hand. Christ was born in that moment of vulnerability where both lives were touched. Craig writes in his book, *Souls in the Hands of a Tender God*, "The

gentleness of God creates room for us to be present with one another, and to discover in depth who we are and what it means to be human.”

In that encounter with Franklin, Craig learned who he was to be. He began a new ministry with the homeless to create communities that care for the most fragile and estranged. God incarnate surprises us, coming not in the stained glass moments, but in the terror of an emergency room visit or in the gritty, tiring work of a soup kitchen or in the simple human touch.

The natural inclination of our culture is to shun the other who represents our fear of being impoverished. We cling to our things for security, as if they will save us. Rather, with each step we take towards the other, we become less secure and more ready to receive the one who can save us. When the angels encountered those shepherds in the fields, they comforted them saying, “Do not be afraid!” They speak also to us, when we begin to avert our eyes from another’s suffering. If Jesus came to our door, a little disheveled seeking shelter and food, would we welcome him?

Meanwhile, in the little town of Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, that is, alongside the protesters of the shelter, came passionate testimony from those who had served the homeless, including the Cathedral Church of the Nativity. Implicit in the birth narrative is this subversive message: that God dwells in the unexpected people and places of life, and our embrace of the other, is the welcoming of Christ. The board overwhelmingly voted in favor of creating a permanent shelter in Bethlehem to offer help and hope to those in need. Jesus was born anew in hearts that day.

On this holy night, God incarnate comes to show us how to be human in a world where the inns of welcome can be scarce. Prepare him room, do not be afraid for I bring you tidings of great joy. To you, and you and you, and every vulnerable heart is born a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. Christmas blessings one and all, Amen.