

SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

■ "THE OUTSIDE AND THE INN"


"...because there was no place for
them in the inn." (Luke 2:7b)

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"...because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7b)

It wasn't the Bethlehem Hilton to be sure, but whatever its name and size the inn that failed to accommodate Joseph and Mary two thousand years ago is familiar to more people than the most widely advertised hotel in the world. We all have a personalized mental picture of that inn, and a particular set of feelings that asserts itself when we come to that line in the Nativity story, "And she gave birth to her first-born son and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn."

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Should ever the site of that inn be identified with certainty by archeologists, preachers around the world should be taxed for its restoration because of all the sermons it has given them. Most of these sermons, I fear, have been neither fair nor realistic. This one may be no better.

The usual characterization makes the innkeeper a villain in the piece, and the registered guests unwitting accomplices.

But let me take the innkeeper's part for a moment. Because of Mary's condition it is likely that she and Joseph arrived late. What was the innkeeper to do, evict a paid-up guest to accommodate two new strangers? Perhaps in the dark he could not discern that Mary was with child. Perhaps he never saw or spoke to either of them. Some employee out front, or a posted sign, could have made it quite clear that no more room was available.

As for the guests, it was probably the case that not one of them knew what was going on. Guests as a rule do not determine hotel policy or participate in its application. To make that anonymous businessman the prototype of Christ-rejection is at once unwarranted and unjust.

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"She gave birth to her first-born son and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." We are on firmer ground when we approach the subject by asking what Jesus' being born in a stable tells us about God and His ways with men. We may assume that if ever providence operated anywhere, it operated in the arrangements that surrounded Jesus' birth. Details of time and place and manner were not left to chance. Why then the stable and not the inn?

Because God has a way of coming into history from the outside - from outside our theological systems, our social and religious institutions, our ingrown patterns and ways of doing. Let the inn, therefore, represent the establishment, and let us learn from that first Christmas that God, more likely than not, will come to us without benefit of establishment succour or support. Paul understood this. In his first letter to the Christians at Corinth he noted that: "To shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts weakness. He has chosen things low and contemptible, mere nothings, to overthrow the existing order." (I Cor. 1:27, 28 NEB)

And this, not because God is capricious, but because man from the beginning has sought to capture, control and exploit the holy; to identify God with his own interests, to make God party to his purposes, to blunt God's truth by intimacy and familiarity. In short, to take God over.

God never leaves Himself without a witness. But when you stop to think about it you realize that from the very beginning the witnesses have a way of coming not from the inn but from the outside.

James Sanders has reminded us recently that the first lesson in morality recorded anywhere in the Bible came from an outsider. Abraham had passed his wife Sarah off in Egypt as his sister. He was reprimanded in these words by Pharaoh: "What is this that you have done to me? Why

did you say, 'She is my sister,' so that I took her for my wife?" (Gen. 12:18, 19) This is a voice from outside faith correcting the father of the faithful.

It was the outside voice of Elijah that nettled Ahab and Jezebel established in their royalty. It was the people of Nineveh who responded to Jonah's appeal for repentance. It was Ruth from the pagan land of Moab who gave to the Jews returned from exile their most convincing demonstration of love.

And in the New Testament the pattern continues. The forerunner of Jesus was not a conventional Pharisee or Sadducee, but a voice crying in the wilderness. It was a Roman centurion who prompted Jesus to say, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith." (Luke 7:9b) They were Greeks who came to Andrew during Holy Week and said, "Sir, we would see Jesus." (John 12:21) It was a Samaritan rather than a priest or Levite who saved the helpless man that day. And in the early church it was an outsider, Saul of Tarsus, who caught the vision of divine grace and set the Christian cause in motion.

We keep looking to the inn for our salvation, but the Savior waits outside. Large corporations often go outside for their chief executives lest by promoting from within they become perilously inbred. The salvation of public education in this city is more likely than not to come from voices outside the inn of the establishment. Institutions that really want their efficiency evaluated call in an outside firm.

I participated a while ago in a panel on preaching with three other ministers. The subject was the future of preaching. It was the dullest panel that you could imagine. If preaching has some place to go, as perhaps it does, it will only learn where it should go and what it should be about by listening to the outside. The answer will not come from within the preaching establishment. When George E. Reedy was press secretary to President Johnson he was appalled by the fact that the President nowadays, no matter what his party, is spared direct contact with critical voices from without. He has given us his findings in a book on-

mously titled The Twilight of the Presidency. It was a youthful outside voice in the well-known fairy tale that told the king that he was naked.

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Perhaps by now you are able to sense why I am troubled about our Christmases. It would almost appear that we had Jesus in captivity, that we were holding Him by virtue of our hospitality toward Him. We assume that Christ is in the inn with us. And that, my friends, is the fatal assumption.

Our celebrations of Christmas are usually aesthetically pleasing and neatly engineered. We have a way of postponing the questions that the Christ child came to raise. Our various rites and services are designed to minimize the differences between God's holy will and our imperfect ways.

I suppose it is alright now to quote from The Catcher in the Rye. Do you remember that passage where Holden takes his girlfriend to see the colorful Christmas extravaganza at Radio City? The lights are there, the sound of well tuned instruments, the hidden wires, the motion, the activity, the song, dramatic curtain effects and first-rate professional staging. But Holden sees through it when he says, "Old Jesus probably would've puked if He could see it--all those fancy costumes and all. The thing Jesus really would've liked would be the guy that plays the kettle drum in the orchestra." 1

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The homelessness of Jesus is the source of His power over men! The homelessness of Jesus is the source of His power over men! "He hath no place to lay his head." (Mat 18:20b) Not in your ideology or mine. Not in your theology or mine. Not in your church or mine. "He hath no place to lay his head." He is not in the inn of black theology or white supremacy either one. He is not in the inn of laissez-faire capitalism or the socialist state. He is not in the inn of the American dream or Soviet Russia's latest

ten year plan. To all of these He is outside. And this is our salvation and our hope.

God did not come in Jesus Christ to ratify our judgments, to confirm our values, to help us fulfill our wishes. Rather, He came as one outside to bring the light of God to bear on all our strivings.

"She gave birth to her first-born son and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:7a) That's where He is, outside. And that's where we must go to find him, outside.

I had the pleasure of studying some years ago at Princeton Seminary under a man now deceased who was an eminent authority in homiletics, Andrew W. Blackwood. His son, Andrew, Jr., is a distinguished preacher in his own right, and has given us a poem about Christmas with which I should like to end. It states better than I have done the burden of my heart today:

"Jesus, what have you done to us?
we wanted a pet kitten
and you turned into a tiger
we liked you the way you were
why couldn't you leave us alone?

We wanted you to show up when we wanted
you to make us feel good
We wanted a pretty church for weddings and
baptisms and funerals
We wanted the cute Easter bunny hopping
around the lawn
We thought religion is good for the kiddies.

Now all of a sudden you've turned against us.
We wanted peace and you brought us a sword.
Things were going along all right
then you got interested in the poor people
now they're strutting around like they are
going to inherit the earth.

Now all of a sudden you tell us to love our enemies.
Do you know what will happen if we do?

They will nail our hide to the wall and what
will we do then keep on praying for them?

We liked you when you were a little boy
gentle, meek and mild
cooing in your cradle
all those nice shepherds and angels
and we felt just awful about King Herod.

Look at all we did for you.
We made a national holiday in your honor.
We built big industries around it
Christmas cards, toy machine-guns for
the kiddies all those fancy gift-wrapped
whiskey bottles.

We built pretty churches in your honor
stained glass, organs, the works
and when the people moved away from the
riffraff
the church followed them
straight out into the suburbs.

Look at all we've done for you, Jesus
why can't you leave us alone?
We've got enough troubles now
why do you keep poking us in the conscience?
What do you want, our hearts?" 2

CLOSING PRAYER

O Thou who art busy with every man, enable us,
by Thy Spirit, to face up to more in Christmas
than we have ever understood before.

Help us to want what Thou has promised; to hear
what Thou hast said; and to receive Thy gift on
Thy terms - to our salvation and Thy glory
Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Salinger, J. D., The Catcher in the Rye, p. 125, Signet Books, 1945
2. Blackwood, Andrew, Jr., "Jesus What Have You Done To Us?," Presbyterian Life, January 15, 1969

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