

**The Birth in the Stable**  
**Matthew 2:4-7**  
**December 24, 2017 8:00 p.m. – Christmas Eve**

So the time has come. Joseph has traveled from Nazareth in Galilee to Bethlehem to be registered with Mary. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. She gave birth to her first born and wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.

Now friends, we've heard this story every Christmas. We've seen it played out in dramas. This poor young couple arrives in Bethlehem late at night. The mother is in labor. They knock on the innkeeper's door only to be told there are no rooms available and have the door slammed in their face; and so, lacking any other option, they proceed to the stable.

You know the story. I know the story. So imagine my surprise when this Christmas season, I read the scripture again – this time from a new translation, the Common English Bible. I read that Mary “wrapped [the baby] snugly, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the guestroom.” (Matt. 2:7 CEB) The guestroom? What's that about? That sent me searching. It turns out that the original Greek word is *kataluma*, which indeed means guestroom or lodging for guests. Adam Hamilton, the pastor of the largest United Methodist Church in the country, points out that, in the first century, Bethlehem was not big enough to have an inn. The guest room was a probably just that, a room in a house probably the house of one of Joseph's relatives; and the house was probably quite crowded because of the many relatives whom, like Joseph and Mary, had come to be enrolled in the census.

So next question... If this was the house of one of Joseph's relatives, why would they not make room for this poor woman in labor. To that, there are probably two answers. First, houses, particularly houses of common people in the first century did not offer a lot of privacy. So, would Mary really have wanted to give birth in a relatively small house that was packed with people, or would she have rather found a quiet place with just herself, her husband, and perhaps a midwife?

But there's another issue, and that's the Jewish law. There is no question that Joseph and Mary and all their family were good Jews. As you may know, traditional Judaism is quite concerned with ritual cleanliness. As twenty-first century Christians, we might consider first century Jewish law to be somewhat archaic and maybe even harsh; but, in the first century, if Mary were to give birth in “the guestroom” that room would be considered ritually unclean for forty days, and anyone entering that room would be considered ritually unclean, unable to

attend worship or associate with ritually clean Jews for forty days. In a house packed with people, to make the guestroom unusable would have been severely limiting.

And so, it's entirely possible that the parents of Jesus were not forced out of some inn and into the stable. Rather they may have willingly and compassionately moved to the stable where Mary could deliver God's Son in privacy, in security, and in peace.

Now a word about the stable... In fact, the Bible never mentions a stable. It does tell us several times that the Baby Jesus was laid in a manger, which is a feeding trough for animals. When you hear about Jesus being born in a stable, don't think of a barn. No. In the first century, most often animals were stabled in natural caves in the rocky hills, and this is certainly true about the birth place of Jesus. Today, The Church of the Nativity is built above the cave where Jesus was born. It's the longest continually worshipping Christian church in the world, and visitors are welcome to proceed through the church and down a narrow staircase where they can enter the cave – the place of the birth. I've been blessed to be there twice, once in 2012 and once in 2014. It's a hugely spiritual experience to kneel and pray at the place of the birth.

But today is Christmas Eve. Enough of all the academic, factual background. What's the point? I tell you, there is something wonderfully beautiful in the humility of the scene, in the compassion of the couple. Let me repaint the picture...

The couple arrives in Bethlehem late into the evening. The birth pangs have started. They proceed to the house of Joseph's Uncle to find it packed with people. There is a hustle and bustle all around. They ask about a room, and are told there are six to eight people staying in every room of this small house, but a room will be cleared for the couple. The couple says, "No. No, we don't want that. Is there another place, a quiet place, a warm place, a secure place?" The owner of the house says, "Well, there is the stable, the cave just down the hill. The animals only take part of the room and there's plenty of fresh straw. If you really want quiet, privacy, security, you're welcome to use the stable for the night." Joseph looks at Mary, and she nods. Joseph replies, "That will be fine."

So it is, the Savior of the world, the King of Kings, the Son of God was born among the animals. His mother wrapped in snugly, and laid him in a manger. Indeed it was in a feeding trough for the animals that the Bread of Life spent his first night on earth. Picture the humility, the humility of the couple, the humility and still the gentle warmth of the setting. It's a beautiful setting, because it points to a beautiful life. Indeed Jesus' entire life was about humility and servanthood combined with warmth and security and peace.

Those of you who know me know that I have what I call “The Story of the Bible.” It’s an entire sermon, and I will not preach it tonight. Let me simply say that the story of the Bible bridges from the Old Testament to the New Testament by explaining that God so loved the world, that God said, “Okay, if you won’t come to me, I’ll come to you; and the Word became flesh and blood to live our life, to walk with us, to teach us, to heal us and ultimately to die for us only to raise again to a newness of life and a promise to be with us always.” On this night a little over two thousand years ago, God humbled Godself, to take on human form; and the story of that human, the Good News of the Gospel begins in this most humble of beginnings.

Praise be to God for Mary and Joseph, the humble couple. Praise be to God for the humility of the setting in which the Son of God would be born. Praise be to God for the Good News of God’s Amazing Love come to earth this day to bring each of us humility and love and joy and peace. Amen.

Rev. Mark L. Steiger, Pastor  
North Olmsted United Methodist Church