

The Innkeeper's Pride

Luke 2:1-8

Steve Hollaway

Harbor Church

December 18, 2011

The baby? Sure, I remember him. You'd remember the story if a dog or a cat was born in your garage, wouldn't you? This was a baby born in my stable, there in one corner on some clean straw, surrounded by what pass for vehicles around here—donkeys, and the occasional horse.

It was thirty-five years ago, but I've had reason to think about it lately. We'll get to that. I still own the Bethlehem B&B, still struggling to make it financially. Jerusalem is growing out to us, so we are more and more a suburb, but it feels like a very small town. We've got history, all right, but not much more. Jacob's wife Rachel is buried nearby; Ruth and Boaz got married here; King David was born near here. But it's not enough to generate much tourist traffic, especially in the winter—except, of course, when people are required by the Romans to register for the census in their ancestral home. That's what happened the time the couple with a baby on the way showed up.

They didn't get mad when I told them I had no more rooms. They must have expected it, showing up as late as they did. They seemed grateful when I offered them a stall in the stable, away from the prying eyes of the guests packed into my place. I asked where they were from—Nazareth, way up north. I asked, of course, if they were married. I had a reputation to keep up. The man said that they were not married, although they were engaged. It made me glad I *didn't* have room in the inn where everyone would notice the lady's condition. Around here, you don't have a baby until *after* you marry. I almost regretted letting people like that in my stable.

That was my first big mistake, I see now. I thought I was better than an unwed mother. I looked down on her back then. I thought people like that needed to get religion. All my friends felt the same way. What I found out later was that God was *with* that unwed mother, contrary to all my stereotypes.

Later that night I heard noises coming from back in the stable—not animal noises, either—and I went back to check for trouble. It wasn't burglars; it was a darn party going on! The stable was full of filthy shepherds, all jabbering away a bunch of nonsense about angels, and there in the middle of them was that little lady and her baby, as fresh and tiny as could be. I could not imagine how these guys could be her friends. *You* may have romantic ideas about shepherds, but not me. These guys stink. They live out in the fields with animals. They are unclean. The priests don't let them in the temple, and I don't let them in my inn. But I guess they are right at home in a stable.

As I said, I've been thinking about those days again recently. My attitude toward the poor people from the country wasn't any different from other town people, but I'm ashamed of it now. I've had a chance to get to know some shepherds personally. I've heard a very wise man call himself "the good shepherd." But the truth is that in those days—and this was my second big mistake—I thought I was better than the poor. It never occurred to me that God might be on the side of the poor or that he might bless the poor more than the middle class—or even the rich.

Those shepherds left as quickly as they came, and when the little baby was a few days old the new mother and dad moved out of the stable. I didn't hear from them again, but I did hear

that they had settled in Bethlehem with some distant relatives they had located. I never made a connection between them and the next strange thing that happened in town.

About a year and a half after the big crowd we had with the census, we had another influx of visitors. I'm not learned enough to understand all that the prophets said, but there was an idea you heard from time to time that the Messiah was supposed to come from Bethlehem, like David did. You know, if I was the Messiah, I don't think I'd choose to be born in this town. It seemed like a weird idea to me at the time, one of those urban legends, maybe.

But the legend was the reason we got visitors. This time we had a group of astrologers from Persia—what you would call Iran—who said they saw something in the stars and came all the way to Bethlehem looking for a new king. To repeat myself, Bethlehem is a small town and my inn is the only game in town, so that whole crew came in looking for a place to lodge. They had attendants and porters and camels and luggage you wouldn't believe. They filled up the B&B and the stable both.

Once again I was glad for the business but I wasn't thrilled about the clientele. These foreigners spoke Greek like most educated people, but they also chattered in some strange language as if they were trying to keep secrets from the decent people. Their clothes were too loud for my tastes, and too showy. They had strange ideas about God, and they were vegetarians. They smelled like spices. But they paid cash, and the story went round that they had a lot of expensive stuff with them to give to this alleged new king.

I never made a connection between those foreigners and the baby born in the stable. Why would I? But that wasn't my big mistake. I realized later that my third big mistake was that I thought that I was better than foreigners. I thought they didn't have anything to teach me. I thought I knew so much more about God than they did. I missed out on a lot that way.

I was thirty years later before I heard a lot of buzz about the Messiah again. I'd gone into Jerusalem for the Passover. We used to go to Jerusalem for festivals the way you'd go to Providence for a concert. Big city, lots of activity, worship in the Temple. This time, though, everybody was talking about this teacher named Jesus, from Nazareth, up North. Some people claimed he was the Messiah, but he sure didn't *look* like one. I figured he was just one more fanatic, convincing people to leave their families and businesses behind to follow him around the countryside. Some kind of cult leader. He wanted to change everything. It wasn't enough to follow the law, he said; you had to be even better than that. You had to be part of God's reign here and now since the Messiah was here, and you had to change your heart, not just your behavior. He was so demanding—and yet he was so liberal. He would hang around with Roman collaborators and known sinners, even women of ill repute. He would insult the Pharisees. His best friends were the poor and the lepers. Not my kind of people. At least not at the time.

I'm a middle class guy with middle class values. I'm a small business owner. My religion was as conventional as the rest of my life. All those Jesus people seemed like a bunch of extremists to me. And of course, they *were*. I just wanted to wave a palm branch for God and country, and they wanted me to give my whole life for this kingdom they were bringing in. Once I understood how radical they were—how they threatened the Temple and threatened peace with Rome—I was dead set against them. It didn't surprise me when the government decided to put an end to the movement by executing the leader. Law and order has its price.

But it seems to me now that I never really listened to the truth about Jesus; I never really listened to him. I reacted to what I heard about him from other people and once again stereotyped a person I could have learned from. That was my fourth big mistake—I thought I was better than

the extremists. I thought everything good happened at the center and that only nuts were on the fringe. Turns out there's pride in the center, too.

It was on another trip to Jerusalem that this all became clear to me. This time it was for the festival of Pentecost to celebrate the giving of the Law. Fifty days had gone by since Passover. It had been a strange Passover, what with the execution of the dangerous teacher and the strange weather, and there was a rumor that some of the cult members were still hiding out in Jerusalem. I didn't see any evidence of it until one morning I was in a public square on my way to the Temple then I heard a loud wind blowing and then saw a crowd of people gathered around a group of Galileans. As I got closer I heard something very strange: the Galileans were all speaking foreign languages, and the Jews from all over the world were understanding them. And they were saying something about Jesus.

Then one of them stood up on a platform and began shouting his message. He said something unbelievable—that Jesus, who had been killed, really *was* the Messiah, and that God had raised him from the dead to rule over the world from heaven. At first that sounded preposterous to me, but then a fear passed through me. What if I was mistaken? What if I was wrong about the extremists, and my religion, and my middle class values? What if we had killed the Messiah? Then it was as if somebody invisible poked me. I knew that I *was* wrong and that Jesus was right about God. I heard someone in the crowd yell out to the teacher, “What should we do?” That was my question, too. If I was wrong about this, what can I do about it now? The teacher answered, “Turn your life around, turn to God, and immerse yourself fully in the reality of Jesus the Messiah, and your sins will be forgiven.”

As I listened to the teacher, I saw a woman standing with him. I thought I knew her from somewhere. I asked someone who she was. “Oh,” they said, “that's the mother of Jesus.” I looked into her face, trying to connect her with something in my past, and then it came to me. I saw her lying on the straw in my stable in Bethlehem, holding that baby, fresh and tiny. She was that woman I looked down on. As I looked on her face and thought about how I had been wrong about everything, my pride seemed to melt away. I had been wrong about her, wrong about the poor, wrong about the foreigners, wrong about the extremists. I had thought I was right about everything and they were wrong. But Jesus being raised from the dead turned it all upside down.

There aren't many of us in Bethlehem—yet—that feel that way. The authorities *like it* that way. But me, I'm happy to hang out with stinkin' shepherds now, and scruffy fishermen, and women with histories, and young radicals who demonstrate in public squares. I'm happy, because that's what it means to hang out with the little guy who was born in my stable. That's what it means to hang out with God.