



“Invited Home” ***December 24, 2021***

Luke 2:1-7

Rev. Andy Call, Lead Pastor

2537 Lee Road
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118-4136
Telephone: 216-321-8880
Website: www.COTSumc.org

“She gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

Did you ever wonder *why* there was no place for them in the inn, or guesthouse, or whatever accommodations were available in Bethlehem? If everyone went to their family’s ancestral hometown to be registered, then shouldn’t Joseph have had family there that night? Where were they? I’ve been to lots of family reunions, and though we’re not all best buddies, I’m pretty sure even if I showed up late without reservations, and there weren’t any rooms to be had, some family member would find a way to squeeze me into their hotel room or their camper, especially if my wife was nine months pregnant and about to give birth any minute.

Could it be that Luke in his telling of Jesus’s birth is signaling that there was conflict with Joseph’s family? Mary and Joseph hadn’t exactly followed the playbook for fulfilling expectations, after all. Mary had become pregnant while they were betrothed. When Joseph found out, he hadn’t “put her away quietly” as would have been the conventional reaction and as the Gospel of Matthew tells us Joseph initially planned. If it was Joseph’s child, shame. If it was not, well, that might be worse. They were not setting themselves up for a successful life.

If Luke wanted us to know that Joseph was uninvited by his family members, which seems likely given the circumstances, he also wanted us to know that things would be radically different for the people around Jesus and his family. Desperate for a place to have their child, Mary and Joseph settle for a place where animals are kept. They didn’t insist that the livestock be moved or that the place be swept out and sanitized for them; they took what shelter and warmth was offered. The first witnesses to his birth were not loving family members, but a donkey, perhaps a cow, a goat or two. And when the news was proclaimed by heavenly messengers, it wasn’t to the town leaders or the “important people,” but to a group of dozing shepherds – drifters, outsiders, not part of the established community. Not only were they told this news, but they were invited to come and see for themselves – outsiders no more. Still no mention of grandparents or aunts and uncles, cousins, or kid brothers.

The birth of Jesus is a story of reversals. Those who had been left out are now in. Those who might have been insiders are left out – not so much because of God’s actions, but their own choices and attitudes. In Matthew’s gospel, which follows a different part of Jesus’s infancy, foreign mystics are the ones who get the privilege of meeting God-with-us. Sorry, Herod – your power-grabbing, manipulative ways don’t secure you an invitation to this party.

How much did Jesus learn about these stories growing up? Did his parents tell him the whole story of the night he was born? Did they protect him from the truth, or were they transparent about their poverty, their desperation, and the way their own family had shunned them and banished them from hospitality? Did they recount to him that when they felt most alone, most vulnerable, God invited strangers to become their surrogate family, showering love and attention when those who *should have* would not? Did they tell him how, in the absence of birthday presents from his own community, God sent wise people from a foreign land to lavish his family with gifts far more valuable – gold and incense, yes, but also a warning and a plan for protection by becoming refugees in Egypt. Did he grow up knowing all this?

Jesus would spend the rest of his life making sure the outsiders were invited in, from fishermen and tax collectors to a woman caught in adultery, drunkards and prostitutes, Samaritans and lepers. Those who were insiders so often ended up left out, not because God designed it that way, but because they couldn’t or wouldn’t see the gift offered to them, as the comfortable and well-established so often do. And at the end, Jesus would give up his own life to the hands of the insiders so the outsiders would be invited in forever.

When we build places of comfort and familiarity, when we’re inclined toward privilege or exclusive access, we would be wise to reconsider our plans. When we have the chance to dismantle barriers and open the doors wide, we should drop everything and seize the moment. Because the story of One whose birth we celebrate tonight has always been about invitation. The God who brought us to life never *compels* us to faithfulness, but continues to *invite* us, selfish

and inattentive as we may be. Despite the temptation to erase us from the pages of history for ignoring God's path and choosing our own, God would not turn away from us. If we would not come near on our own, God would draw near to us, becoming one of us, entering the world as a tiny, helpless infant born to a teenage mother and a cast out father. Through him, the offer of life and salvation was given first to God's chosen people, then broke out of those boundaries to Gentiles, outsiders, which is pretty much all of us in this room right now. And that gift is offered still – to the insiders too busy or too satisfied to look for it, to outsiders who are yet unaware of the depth of God's love for them or conditioned not to expect it.

Maybe because of his origin story, Jesus was all about the left out and the left behind. And when the church gets it right, which we sometimes do, thanks be to God, we are, too – seeking out those who have been left out or left behind, who live on the margins, who've been told they're undeserving or unworthy of a place at the table, a voice in their fate, or the love that makes them part of the family. And, God willing, we will never stop striving to be more like Jesus in the way we live and the church we are constantly becoming.

That's Good News. But there's even better news. The story of God's love for us isn't just played out on a grand, cosmic scale. Yes, God came to us in Jesus to offer life to all of us – insiders or outsiders – but also to you, and also to me, to each one of us. That gift is universal, but it's also personal. Even if you've spent your entire life building an illusion of self-sufficiency, keeping God at arm's length, God's invitation is here. If you think you've gone the wrong direction too many times in your life, God's invitation is here. If you keep the brokenness you feel hidden beneath carefully constructed but flimsy layers of happiness, God's invitation is here. Or if you've been going through the motions, being a good person but not really "feeling it" when it comes to your relationship with Jesus, God's invitation is here. We may live in a world of insiders and outsiders. But in this birth we celebrate tonight, this Christmas story, God speaks over and through our expectations, whispering into our ears and our hearts: *You belong here. This gift is for you. I love you more than you know. And I can't wait to welcome you home.*