

Sermon for the Christmas Eve Candle Light Service

Date: December 24, 2018

Location: St. John's Lutheran Church, Austin, MN

Old Testament: Isaiah 53:1-3

Epistle Reading: 1 John 4:7-16

Gospel Reading: Matthew 1:1-7



Sermon Text: Matthew 1:1-7

Sermon Title: Characters of Christmas – The Inn Keeper

Hymns:

LSB – 379 O Come, All Ye Faithful (v. 1,2,4)

LSB – 356 The Angel Gabriel from Heaven Came (v. 1,2)

LSB – 361 O Little Town of Bethlehem (v. 1,2)

LSB – 366 It Came upon the Midnight Clear (v.1,2)

LSB 397 – As with Gladness Men of Old (v. 1-3)

LSB – 376 Once in Royal David's City

LSB – 380 Hark! The Herald Angels Sing

LSB – 363 Silent Night, Holy Night (v.1-3)

Liturgy:

Divine Service: Service of Light



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Text: Luke 2:1-7

¹ At that time the Emperor Augustus ordered a census of the Roman Empire. ² This was the first census taken while Quirinius {kw-EYE-rin-ee-us} was governor of Syria {SEER-ee-ah}.

³ All the people went to register in the cities where their ancestors had lived. ⁴ So Joseph went from Nazareth {NAZ-ah-reth}, a city in Galilee {GAL-li-lee}, to a Judean {jude-EE-an} city called Bethlehem. Joseph, a descendant of King David, went to Bethlehem because David had been born there. ⁵ Joseph went there to register with Mary. She had been promised to him in marriage and was pregnant. ⁶ While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to have her child. ⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn son. She wrapped him in strips of cloth and laid him in a manger because there was no any room for them in the inn.



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Grace to you and peace in the name of the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

We know nothing about the inn keeper who was forced to turn Mary and Joseph away that night. We don't even know his name. There are no traditions telling us anything about him. All we know is that his place was full, and there was no corner left to give to anyone. Not even an expectant couple. The best we can do is take some of what we know, about how people lived in those days, and then make some guesses about what he might have been like. Then maybe, just maybe, we can get a glimpse into the life they lived.

I'm going to call this inn keeper Zenodochos¹ and I'm going to assume he had a wife. Her name is Suzugos.² (Zen and Suzie for short.) We know nothing about these people, other than they owned the only motel in Bethlehem. Bethlehem was a very small town in those days and didn't have much as far as hotels and motels. We know that by the time Mary and Joseph got there every room was full.

...but we're getting ahead of ourselves already. You see, it all started out on the road...

Joseph and Mary had been making their way from Nazareth to Bethlehem. It was a tough trek for a woman nearly nine months pregnant. They moved slowly, but why would they do otherwise? Who would want to be in a rush to get taxed anyway?



See the readings page for a larger view of this map.

Joseph did his best to keep Mary comfortable. Especially on those nights when there was no place to sleep except the cold hard ground. It's about 100 miles from Nazareth to Bethlehem. The terrain is through mountains and hills. It would have been a difficult time.

They had been doing well, and were now just outside of Bethlehem. Joseph would have probably reminisced about how much things had changed since he grew up here as a young boy. Maybe he would have told Mary about this new shop or that new house. "Just inside the gate is the home where I grew up Mary. I wonder who lives there now? Probably no one I know. I haven't been back here in years."

"Joseph."

"Yes?"

"It's time."

"Time for what?"

"It's time Joseph!"

"You mean...right now? Can't you wait?"

1 Ξενοδόχος (Xenodochos) – A Greek word that means "Inn Keeper."

2 Σύζυγος (Suzugos) – A Greek word that means "wife."

“These things happen when they happen Joseph.”

“O dear! Hold on! We’re nearly there. The inn is not far away.”

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[At the Inn]

At the inn, Zen and Suzie were hustling and bustling about. There were just so many people. Suzie did her best to keep the kitchen rolling and food flowing but, “Oh my, there’s just so many people Zen!”

“I know dear. Do your best. No hurry. Just... ah, hurry!”

They scurried about trying to give everyone what they needed as quickly as possible. They had already turned away so many people. They’d been full now for days. “I have no idea what Rome was thinking with this hair-brained idea to make everyone travel like this. Do you think they’d ever give any thought to how we’re supposed to care for all these people?”

“Zen, not so loud. You never know when a Roman guard could be walking by.”

“You’re right dear. I’m just frustrated.”

A man came to the door of the inn and asked, like so many had in the past few days, “Do you have any room?”

Zen could only respond, “There’s nothing left. I’m sorry.”

“Can we at least get some food?”

“I’m sorry, there’s just nothing left that we can do. We’re so busy with those we already have here. I’m sorry.”

The man walked away.

Serving people, making up beds, hanging sheets for a little privacy in the rooms that were being shared. Neither of them had slept much in the last few days. Zen and Suzie were both very tired.

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[With Mary and Joseph]

“Oooh! Joseph! The time is near.”

“It’s just down this short road. Hold on!”

Joseph ran up to the door of the inn, “Do you have any room? My wife is about to give birth!”

Zen had said it so many times he didn’t even think as he spoke, “I’m sorry, there’s just nothing left that we can do. We’re so busy with those we already have here. I’m sorry.”

“My wife is about to give birth!”

“There’s just nothing. I’m sorry.”

“Wait! Zen, we can’t just turn them away.”

“What would you have me do Suzie? Throw out someone else?”

“There must be something, Zen. What about the stable?”

“That’s no place for a baby to be born!”

“Zen...”

“I haven’t had timer to clean it out for days.”

“Zen!”

“What?!”

“The baby is coming, Zen. We have to do something. The stable is better than the street.”

Zen exhaled sharply, “I suppose. There’s some fresh straw behind the stable. You can cover up some of the mess with that.”

Suzie said, “Come with me.”

“Suzie, there are people to feed.”

“They’ll just have to wait a little longer, Zen.”

Suzie brought them out to the stable and showed them the extra straw. “I wish there was something more we could do but it’s all been so busy. Please use anything that is here. Make yourselves as comfortable as you possibly can. I’ll bring some cloth out in a little while.” She scurried back to the inn as quickly as she could.

Joseph raked out the floor of the stable and then put down some fresh straw, and none to soon. Suzie ran out with some old clean rags a little later. She could see the nervousness on Joseph’s face, and wished she could stay but there was just so much to do.

“This is no place for you Mary,” Joseph said. “We should not be doing this here. I feel like I’ve failed God, and you.”

The night went on... Jesus was born.

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[A the Inn]

The inn calmed down as people fell asleep. In all the hustle and bustle Suzie had almost forgotten. “Zen! That young couple in the stable, we’ve got to go out and see how they are doing.”

“Oh, you’re right. I’m so tired. Come on, I’ll go with you. Let’s see if there’s anything more we can do for them.”

They walked out behind the inn and were surprised to see a group of people gathered around the stable. Zen was annoyed and thought the young couple should have some privacy. “What are you all doing here? Have you never seen a baby before? Move along now!”

No one moved. It was Suzie who noticed first, “Zen, they’re all shepherds.”

“I don’t care who they are, there’s no need for them to bother these good people.”

“Sir,” one of the shepherds said. “We’ve come to see the new born king.”

“King? What sort of king is born in a stable. Are you mad? What are you doing here?”

“Sir, we were in the fields, outside of Bethlehem, when an angel came to tell us of the birth of the Messiah. We have come here, on his direction, to see the Christ child. We had too. After the angel told us these things, the whole sky was filled with angels. The fields were lit up like the daytime, and they were all singing and giving glory to God. This is the place they told us to come. Joseph and Mary have told us that they were visited by an angel too. This is a very special child. He is the Son of God.”

Zen was tired, and was in a hurry to get to bed. It was going to be a busy day tomorrow, and the next day... and the next day... He pushed his way up to the front of the crowd to ask Joseph if he wanted these people to leave. When he got into the stable, he saw Joseph, Mary and the baby Jesus. Mary just smiled, and as Zen looked at that little child, his heart melted a little bit. All the ‘tired’ in him was forgotten, and all the stress was left behind. “Tell me again, what did the angels tell you?”

The shepherds told their story over again. Joseph and Mary also explained what they had seen, and been told by an angel. Zen hadn’t given much thought to his faith in years. The inn kept him busy. “You mean all those prophecies the priests have told us about, they’re true? And this little baby, in my little stable, He’s the one?”

The shepherds, along with Mary and Joseph, all nodded, as Zen came to the realization that this was a special, a holy night. This man, who never would have put much faith in faith, now was given faith to believe. He knelt down with the shepherds, and sang songs of worship with them. Songs the shepherds were taught by the angels, and the arch-angels, earlier that night. Songs that were sung by them, and all the company of Heaven, that night. Songs sung, because:

“Unto you is born this day, in the City of David, a Savior who is Christ the Lord.³”

He is Emmanuel, “God is With Us.”

It is this evening, for that same reason, that we sing our praises to God.

Amen.