

“No room in the church”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
Christmas Eve – December 24, 2020

Luke 2:1-20, Matthew 2:9-15

By Rev. Patrick D. Heery

A friend of mine was up late Saturday night working on his sermon, when his wife, feeling all the losses of this year, shouted, “This is like the worst Christmas ever!” In what my friend describes as a rare snap witty comeback, he replied, “I dunno, the one where Herod killed a bunch of babies ranks pretty high up there...” Oh murder... so funny. Frankly, I am just thankful that his wife didn’t *murder him* for that snide comment! Yes, we get it: there have surely been bad Christmases before this one. Humanity has had a pretty rough go at it, over the last 2,000 years. But still, probably not the most helpful or wise response to your wife’s legitimate expression of grief. Not, that is, if you wish to stay married.

This is a hard Christmas. Not only is our beautiful Christmas snow melting, but now Central and Upstate New York are getting hit by a storm, which according to the news may cause roof collapses, major flooding, widespread power outages, and icy roads. And all I can think is: of course this is the Christmas Eve 2020 would give us. Brought to you by the year that gave you murder hornets!

This is a hard Christmas. We’re separated from loved ones. We can’t open presents together, or sit down for big family meals. We’re forced to eat our Christmas cookies alone (OK, that one’s not so bad). We’re worried about our health and the health of others. Some of us have friends and family in hospitals, on ventilators. Even as vaccines become available, it feels like the threat of COVID-19 is closing in. Across the world, 1.73 million people have died. Add in racial injustice, politics, forest fires, economic depression, layoffs, personal grief, and yeah, this is a pretty awful Christmas.

When we need it most, we can’t even go to church. Sure, we are worshiping as a church right now, but most of us would really like to be together, to sit in God’s sanctuary as beautiful music wafts over us and we light our candles and we tell the story of the Christ child and we hold each other’s hands and we step out into the soft snow, feeling like for once everything is right with the world. Everything is quiet and at peace. That’s what we want, and that’s what’s been taken from us.

As I wrote this sermon, I thought about all the joyful things I could say, but when it came down to it, they laid crumpled in wads of paper at my feet, because how could I not acknowledge this reality? This Christmas isn’t just different; it hurts.

But maybe that’s the point. I suppose it’s the point my friend was making, though somehow I suspect his snark may not have been appreciated by his wife. Maybe Christmas isn’t supposed to be soft and sweet; maybe it’s sweat and smell, hard ground and rough straw, labor pains and blood and tired eyes. Maybe this Christmas, we find ourselves more than ever on that road to

Bethlehem with Mary and Joseph, not knowing where we will lay our heads, not knowing what the future holds. We approach the church, as Mary and Joseph once approached an inn, and we find the door locked. There's no room in the church.

There was no room for them either.

There was no room for Elizabeth, Mary's cousin, and her husband Zechariah, who struggled with the pain of infertility, who couldn't bear to walk into our warm, sweet spaces, knowing that the happiness of pregnant bellies and laughing children would only highlight their grief.

There was no room for Mary, a pregnant unmarried teenager, who stayed inside to shield herself from the staring, judging eyes. No room for Joseph, whose life plans had derailed, torn between leaving Mary or fathering a child he didn't conceive.

There was no room for the couple as they arrived in town, forced on a long journey by the empire that stole their home, a risky journey for a woman so late in her pregnancy, Joseph consumed with worry. No room as they huddled in a barn, a cave, a cold place, relegated to the animals.

There was no room for the shepherds, who show up at Christ's birth stinking of sheep and wet grass. No room for the hired hands at the bottom of the social ladder, doing the work no one else wanted to. No room in the courts where they weren't allowed to testify; no room in the towns that barred them entry; no room in the temple, where they were considered unclean.

There was no room for the magi, not kings at all, but probably Persian priests and astrologers—not figures of power, but strangers in a foreign land, vulnerable and confused, Arab Gentiles, pagans, heretics, desperate enough to make a dangerous journey, in search of hope.

There was no room for Jesus, hunted by King Herod, forced to flee to Egypt as a refugee, bereft of family and friends. No room for the guy driven out of his home church, the guy who broke all the rules, espoused all the wrong ideas, and hung out with all the wrong people.

There was no room for the parents who wailed for the loss of their children in the wake of Herod's genocide. No room for the ones whose grief made others uncomfortable, wishing they'd just get over it.

I wonder: Over all these years, who else has found no room in the church? Who has watched us from the window as we sang and smiled in our warm, green sanctuaries? Who, struggling with homelessness or mental illness or divorce or grief or past mistakes or doubts or just being different, loving different, looking different, thinking different—who has not felt able to walk through those doors?

We think we've lost Christmas; maybe we've only just found it. Maybe, for the first time, we're all actually together in this experience of being shut out. And maybe that's exactly where we need to be—because *that* is where Christ is born, out here. Now that we're on the outside, looking in, and now that all the other lights have gone out, for the first time we can really see that

star of Bethlehem. For the first time we're really there, beside the manger, with Mary as she screams and Joseph as he wrings his hands, and as that little baby emerges bloody and crying, and we feel hope bursting inside of us, so strong like it's going to break our rib cage, and we can't help but fall to our knees and weep for joy. Because, somehow... somehow... when the world was falling down around us, this life persisted. This birth. This love. It broke through. Stronger. Better. And we don't know how, but it's like, we'll never be the same because of it.

Maybe that's the real story of Christmas: when there's no room in the church, God brings the church to you.

Right now, there are men in that prison down the street, singing carols in the dark. There are soldiers in the trenches of war, kneeling and praying beneath bright stars. There are nurses pausing to taste the goodness of a cookie before they walk into another patient's room. There are people in the homeless shelter gathered around a tree, reading Bibles. There are friends cradling in their arms the ones who have relapsed in their addiction. There are Alzheimer's patients revived and dancing to the Christmas music of their youth. And there's us, connected in worship this Christmas Eve by love, transmitted across wires and data, born on the wings of the Spirit.

Tonight, we hold the child in our arms. Tonight, there are no other lights to distract us. Tonight, we know what it means to need this child, to need this love that is bursting through us. And so, we will sing out the louder. We will raise our candles higher. We will believe the more. A chorus of hallelujahs will fill the skies, not because the world is right, but because, this Christmas, God comes in love to a world that is wrong. God comes to us, on this Charlie Brown, scrawny, no-good Christmas, just as God came all those years ago for Mary and Joseph.

God comes to all the hurting, longing places of the world. We are there, some of us for the first time, some of us already for a long time. Witness the Prince of Peace, for tonight humanity stands together, out there. Evil and hate and selfishness still exist. But, here on the outside, we see each other, and across these vast distances, across not only miles but lightyears of hurt, we reach and hold one another's hands. We look up at the sky. We wait on the star. Love beams. And somewhere, so close, a child is born. And we shall name him Emmanuel: God with us.
Amen.