

WESTMINSTER
PRESBYTERIAN
CHURCH



SERMON

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We Make Room

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The most assuring reality of Christmas involves you. Christ the babe was born a time long ago...for you.

We can learn from the shepherd's response of how to embrace God's gift.

Luke 2:15-20

¹⁵ When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶ So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger.

¹⁷ When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child, ¹⁸ and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them, ¹⁹ and Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

²⁰ The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, just as it had been told them.

As we read these ancient words and sing familiar songs of shepherds and a baby.... As we hear the stories we learned from the tender voice of Linus van Pelt on the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special*, we feel nostalgic for a time and place that seems untouchable today.

Remember when Charlie Brown attempts to direct the perfect Christmas pageant and displays his incomparable ability to botch it. In despair, he finally laments, “I just don’t understand what Christmas is all about.”

Linus reaches back to the Elizabethan language of the King James Bible to recite this story from the Gospel of Luke.

Each year when I study Luke’s account of Jesus’ birth, I’ll google the clip from that Christmas show. Each year as I grow older, even though the animation seems primitive, the story resonates more deeply.

A show created for kids and told by kids speaks the wisdom I need to hear.

Just when I think mentioning that old Christmas show will mark me as irrelevant, I see the page views from Google and am encouraged by its resurgent popularity on TikTok.

Generation upon generation continues to search for truth to pierce our weariness.

Whenever we attempt to construct the perfect Christmas or reshape the world as we envision it should be, we risk seeing our efforts crumble with the impossibility of the task.

This year the story of Jesus' birth lands differently on our hearts. Our hearts feel so very weary.

We hang garlands while a war rages in Europe.

The mention of the word “Ukraine,” at once synonymous with uncommon courage, now drains us to think of people, just like you and me, who grow increasingly fragile from protracted fighting.

The horror of tens of thousands killed in Israel and Gaza causes us to look away from mass graves and cities laid in ruin.

Christmas festivities, once the highlight of the year in the original town of Bethlehem, were canceled. Out of respect for those thrown into the streets or who grieve, only quiet and perhaps more fervent worship will be offered.

In our holy land and beyond, the age-old habit of one nation rising against another nation, destroys the lives of innocents, even though people on both sides crave peace.

Refugees stream from Africa to Europe in search of safety and an unfathomable number of people each day risk their lives by walking from their homes to across our border.

It seems as though the world has grown desperately small, without enough room for one another. The weariness from all the killing and the impossibilities of peace could drive us to lock ourselves away from the tenderness inherent in humanity and our own hearts.

Luke's gospel becomes our balm and guide.

The Roman Emperor and Governor of Syria attempt to create a world in which the people remain both subject to their whims and worship their fragile egos.

Mere mention of these rulers' names reignites the horrors of the time, just like we experience today with the anxiety that turns ordinary people to fear. The dictator's imperial decree sent Mary and Joseph scrambling for their hometowns to register, a euphemism to pay more taxes. When they arrive in Bethlehem, the story tells us there was **no room**.

Imagine arriving at your hometown, perhaps filled to the brim with relatives and they turn you away.

Do they really have no room? Or, do they fear Mary and Joseph as too distant, and therefore untrustworthy? Not enough room to embrace a stranger? Perhaps these relatives disapprove of Mary's pregnancy. When judgement takes hold rarely leaves room for mercy.

None of this stops God. Despite being turned away, Mary and Joseph create a place for their child.

The maker of heaven and earth, who placed stars in the sky, commands thunder and volcanos, who delights in animals as varied as Aslan and hippos, who could embody any human ruler, places God's own self in the flesh of an infant and their tender hands.

These least likely parents, teens themselves, nurture Jesus in their arms and nestle him in the manger. They make room for the savior of the world to breath.

God calls shepherds, people who know more about how to navigate a barn full of animals than polite company. They make room for this possibility.

There is something so right about our nostalgic portrayals of the nativity; the happy family and guests gathered 'round the manger made of straw, a few warm fluff-balls of sheep looking on. What is right about this is that when they make room for the Christ child, God becomes the very center of their lives.

God disrupts the world of Caesar Augustus and Quirinius with a new definition of power, one centered in a totally dependent baby with no notoriety and nothing to commend of him except his abject humanity.

It's the pattern throughout Jesus' ministry as well as an adult. In cultures accustomed to excluding people, he welcomes them. Rather than answer evil with more evil, Jesus calls for justice and offers grace.

In the end, he is put to death to appease the fears of those petty rulers, and God brings new life. When Jesus' rag-tag group of followers find an empty tomb, they carry his spirit with them to the ends of the earth. When ordinary people make room for God, God's love always wins.

Imagine what God can do when you make room for God. Let's make this imagining more tangible. Picture yourself at the manger, as one of the shepherds at the side of the crib after Mary gave birth. Put that in your mind. You see post-partum, exhausted Mary, Joseph with eyes as big as saucers, and a newborn.

Suddenly Mary turns to you and says, "Here, hold the baby." Will you?

Of course, you do. There you are with God's incarnate love in your hands. And you know, just as Mary knew, the world is different.

Let's return to this time and place. Gathered in this pristine sanctuary, will we worship him as if he lives only here. Or will we carry him with us no matter where we go? It is incomprehensible that the one who makes the world, who creates each one of us, now waits for us to make room for the divine in our lives.

This brings us back to Charlie Brown. He didn't need to leave his family like Rudolph or try to get Frosty back to the North Pole before he melted.

He didn't need some pixy-dust magic to make Christmas happen. He needed to open his heart to the simple story from long ago.

There is no end to what Christmas means when we grasp, or even glimpse, that in the infant Jesus, God became flesh. And

if we hold the infant Jesus, perhaps we can hold our neighbors and our enemies with the same tenderness.

Let this old, old story teach you, again, how desperately God loves you.



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