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Covenant Presbyterian Church
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Christmas Eve Homily

Luke 1:26-33, Luke 2:1-7, Luke 2:8-14, Luke 2:15-20

I read a story this week about a Christmas pageant at another church. Pageants are as much known for the unplanned moments that any production by children is sure to have as the way they tell the story of the birth of Jesus. Just this past Sunday in our own pageant we had a fabulous and memorable moment when the pregnant Elizabeth, attempting to transition from pregnant to having given birth, had the balloon used for her pregnant bump pop out from under her skirt and fly up across the chancel. After the service, several women who had given birth commented that they didn't remember it going quite that way.

But, as I said, this week I read about someone else's Christmas pageant and particularly a young boy who was cast as the innkeeper. All week in their practice, the young boy turned the holy family away from the inn to the stable, but in each practice he grew more and more agitated. His family didn't know what the problem was, but the boy was more and more out of sorts and cranky as the week went along. The day of the pageant, the boy dragged his feet getting out of the house, pouted through getting his costume on and stomped around waiting to go on stage. Finally, as the pageant came to his part, and Joseph came up to him to ask for a room, the young boy told him, "there are no rooms in the inn" but then, when Joseph started to turn away the boy rushed to add, "but you can come and stay in my room – it's the best room in the inn and we can make room for you." Well, where does a Christmas pageant go from there? Apparently, the pageant just went on, as if the boy hadn't changed his line, because what else could they do? But afterwards, the boy's parents asked him why on earth he changed the line and he told them that all week it had just felt wrong to tell the holy family there was no room for them when he was sure the innkeeper could make more room if he tried. And so, while the boy got the story wrong, he certainly got the message right.

One of the most compelling, beautiful things to me about the Bible is the way in which it starts off with a chosen people, a narrow group of people following God, and then over and over again, the circle widens, more people get included, and God surprises us again and again with a bigger welcome.

In the genealogy of Jesus himself, we see this. The gospel of Matthew begins with Jesus' genealogy with the goal to "convince (the) readers that Jesus, who had no home, no fortune, and only an unimpressive group of followers, was the royal King in the line of David whose kingdom would never end.

But honestly, if that was all that Matthew...was trying to communicate, there would be no reason for him to include some of the names he chose to include in the genealogy, specifically the names of five women.

(because) Jewish genealogies don't include women. (and) more interesting than the fact that Matthew included women is the particular women he chose to include...Only Mary, who likely descended from the kingly line of David like her husband, Joseph, was Jewish. The other four women Matthew took care to include "...were Gentiles" from different countries and backgrounds.

"Matthew seems to be going out of his way to make clear to his Jewish readers that God had always intended for God's blessings and promises to be for people from every tribe, tongue, and nation."^[1]

And the genealogy is just the beginning of making room for the unexpected. The stories of Jesus' birth is chock full of God making more room for more people. Elizabeth, yet another woman, is the first person to proclaim Jesus as Lord when Mary comes to visit her. The shepherds in the fields - men who were poor and on the very outskirts of society - are included and invited to participate. Wise men from the east – who were certainly not Jews – were drawn to the stable. God just keeps making more and more room. God keeps doing the unexpected and widening the welcome. This is a story about an extravagant love that will go to any lengths to make itself known.

Which then begs the question: if God has made such extravagant room for us, what should be our response? What will we do to make room for God in our own lives?

There are two kinds of answers to this question. First, there's how we can make room for God in our hearts and lives. Our Advent series has been reminding us that while the traditional examples of prayer, study and worship are important ways to make room for God, we can also make room for God when we connect with other people in meaningful ways or take the time to be amazed by something or to wonder and be curious about the world or to try not to take our everyday lives for granted. Doing those things also makes room for God to come in.

But there is another way to make room for God which is to make room for each other.

Just last week I was serving at the food pantry and a man came in who was clearly sick. He was having trouble walking because his legs were so swollen and injured. He hadn't eaten all day. It was that really cold day and he didn't have the right clothes for it. We talked and he was in the middle of moving to Racine and having a really hard time and an especially bad day. I got him set up with a hot meal and the food from the pantry but then I asked him what else he needed and I was able to help connect him with some extra things. I didn't go way out of my way, but I made some extra room for him. I spent a little extra time with him. And before he left he asked if he could pray with me. We sat down to pray and that man opened his mouth and offered just this amazingly beautiful, moving prayer. And he prayed for me and for my family. This man who was in such dire straits, in such a difficult time, took time to make room for me in his prayer. And as beautiful as that is, I don't think it is all that rare. When you make room for someone, so often they will respond with room for you. We want to make room for each other. And I'll tell you, it was a holy moment there in the crowded food pantry with its fluorescent lights and dingy tile floor and boxes everywhere. Because when we make room with each other, God shows up. God rejoices. And, in those moments, Jesus is born into the world, into our hearts, again.

The Christmas story is a beautiful example of God's extravagant love being offered to everyone - outsider, immigrant, foreigner, refugee, poor, rich, everyone. And 2000 years later we could all agree there are still plenty of people today who continue to be on the outside and feel left out of this love.

Which means we miss a major point of the Christmas story if it doesn't cause us to think deeply about how we can make more room for more people - in our lives, in our church, in our community, in our country, in the world. How can we include more people? Personally, and as a church, how do we welcome people? Where do we see barriers and divisions and exclusion happening - both in our own hearts and in our communities. Who is being left out and why? Is our welcome loud enough and clear enough for all to hear it?

The Christmas story invites us to consider how we are making room for God and for others. So, this Christmas, I hope you'll ponder those questions while you also hear loud and clear the message in the Christmas story that God has made so much room for you. Amen.

^[1] <https://www.crossway.org/articles/jesus-troubled-family-history/>