

The No Vacancy Sign

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Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

The First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Luke 2:1-20

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴ Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵ He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶ While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷ And 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.

⁸ In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹ Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹ to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹² This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³ And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,
¹⁴ “Glory to God in the highest heaven,
and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

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 But 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, as it had been told them.

THE NO VACANCY SIGN

A long time ago ... before the advent of cell phones and the internet ... around five o'clock ... weary travelers would begin to pull off the road and look for a motel. In particular we would look at the sign in front of the motel.

Did it still say vacancy or was there a “no” flashing next to the vacancy sign? Those old neon signs would buzz and hum, and sometimes it was hard to tell if the “no” part of the sign was lit or not. Is there no vacancy or is there just a short in the sign?

In some out of the way places our choices were not so good, and we might even stop at a motel where the “no vacancy” sign was flashing. We hoped they would point us to a place not far down the road where we could rent a room.

We've come a long way from those days.

In fact many motels don't even have those no vacancy signs any more. People are able to call ahead while they're on the road and reserve a room for the night.

Some motel chains think that the very appearance of a no vacancy sign is bad for business.

It doesn't seem very hospitable.

But, there are a couple of other reasons some motels shun the vacancy/no vacancy sign.

First, the motel has the opportunity to point the weary traveler to another motel in their chain if they stop. And second, if they don't like the looks of the people wanting a room ... maybe some young spring breakers who might be trouble ... the motel can just say,

“Sorry, we're full tonight.”

The hotel business was a lot different when the Mary and Joseph made their way to Bethlehem.

They didn't have neon no vacancy signs then either. In fact they didn't even have hotels! In those days travelers had to depend upon the hospitality of locals who were willing to take in strangers for the night.

And on this particular night there were a lot of strangers in town, people like Mary and Joseph who were coming to register for the tax that would be levied on them by the Roman government.

And so, the Bible tells us, there was no room for holy couple in the inn. Figuratively speaking, the no vacancy sign was out that night.

And, as we'll see, the no vacancy sign remained out most of Jesus' life.

AN INCONVENIENT BABY

You may have noticed.

Babies often come at inconvenient times.

Did you read about the baby that was born on an airplane bound for Orlando.

A whole plane was diverted to South Carolina because of a child being born!

They made room for this unexpected passenger.

Jesus also was born at an inconvenient time.

What could be a worse time to be born than when all the motels are displaying their "no vacancy" signs?

Unlike the plane headed for Orlando, no one made room for this little boy. And so the only shelter the holy couple could find for their newborn was a cattle stall.

The Bible tells us that after he was born Mary wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid in a "manger" ... a feeding trough for animals.

None of us would want our child to be born this way.

Not only was it dangerous; it was also shameful.

It signified the birth of a child who was not wanted by the world ... no room.

Remember when adults chastised children who left the door open by saying,
“Why did you leave the door open?
Were you born in a barn?”

Well, they wouldn't have to ask that question of Jesus. He was born in a barn.

Can you imagine a worse place?
It was a sign of things to come.
It was a sign of one who would be rejected by many.

You see, the story of the birth of Jesus foreshadows the life that he will live.

For some, like the shepherds watching their flock at night, the child was the Messiah.
He was the savior that the people had been waiting for.

In this child they saw the glory of God.

But there were others who had no room in their hearts for a kid from Nazareth.
Nothing good ever came from that place.

NAZARETH REJECTION

Even the folks from Nazareth seemed to believe that was true.

When Jesus went back to his home town to preach he was rejected.

Why? They knew him.
The home town folks knew his mom and his dad.
Who did Jesus think he was talking like a prophet and claiming to have the power of God?

And they took offense at him.

Where did Joseph and Mary's boy get all these crazy ideas about the kingdom of God?
We know who he is ... and he's certainly not the Messiah.

The kingdom might come in Jerusalem ... or some other big important city ... but in a man born in Nazareth?

Come on. That's crazy.

It was crazy even for those who came from Nazareth.

So when Jesus came to Nazareth, they put out the "no vacancy sign". They had no room for him in their hearts.

Unlike other places, there would be no miracles in Nazareth. Instead, they would run this so-called home town Messiah out of town. In fact, they even tried to kill him by throwing him off a cliff!

Why did the folks in Nazareth reject the miracles that Jesus had to offer while almost everywhere else his ministry was filled with power and glory? Why did the shepherds see the glory of the heavenly host while the innkeeper in Bethlehem just saw a young couple for whom he had no room?

I guess some people have a hard time seeing hope can come in such a humble, human package. But, the Bible tells that this is exactly what happened.

The gospel of John puts it this way,
"The Word of God became flesh and dwelt among us."

But, the Creative Word was not recognized, even among his own people. The world came into being through him but he was a stranger to that world.

For many he is still a stranger.

DO WE HAVE ROOM?

I wonder.

Do we have room in our lives for the Savior that comes?

Do we have room in our lives for the message that he brings?

Can we fall on our knees and hear the angels' voices?

Can we hear the divine call in the cry of a little baby?

Do we believe that the Son of God, the Messiah, the King of kings can come to our home town and be a part of our lives?

Can we see the glory?

Can we hear the good news?

Do we have room in our lives for the Savior that comes?

Sometimes even those of us who know the story best have a hard time making room for Jesus.

In Mark's gospel it's not the unbelievers but the religious leaders that are described as those who have eyes but do not see, and ears but do not hear.

They could not conceive of a Messiah who acted like Jesus.

And so no matter what Jesus did or said, they could not understand or accept him.

Jesus just didn't fit into their world view.

How can a king come from such humble circumstances?

How can the God come in such a down to earth, human way?

Their way of thinking didn't leave room for a Messiah like Jesus.

And so they rejected him.

In fact, they did more than reject him.

Eventually, they had him killed.

When Jesus came to those who should have known him best, there was no room in their hearts for him. It was the story from the very beginning.

The "no vacancy" sign flashed when Jesus first came, and for many people the "no vacancy" sign is still on.

THE HOLIDAY SEASON

Sometimes even people of faith still have a hard time seeing the savior that is born this day.

Why is that?

What blinds us to this glory?

Our vision is still distorted by the culture that surrounds us.

I suggest we make a distinction between the “holiday season” and Christmas.

The holiday season is about shopping, bright lights, and cartoon characters.

The holiday season is full of sound and fury.

In the “holiday season” there is no room for Christmas.

There is no room for Christ.

In such a season the still, small voice of God is drowned out by the more boisterous sounds of the season.

Profits are made in the holiday season.

It’s a season totally dedicated to the bottom line.

Some companies spend more than half of their advertising budget during the holiday season.

Their success or failure is dependent upon this season.

But, in a season dedicated to greed, there’s no room for the little ones among us.

The very ones that God favors are left out in the cold.

CHRISTMAS

But, don’t be discouraged.

Don’t be afraid.

Tonight there will be a change of seasons.

The stores are closed.

The rush is over.

The land that had been filled with such commotion is now eerily quiet.

This is not a time to celebrate cartoon animals and harmless myths.

This is a time when we remember that the Word became flesh

... and that Word still dwells among us.

This is a holy time.
This is a sacred time.

Maybe the enormity of this moment is best expressed by an Advent hymn.

“Let all mortal flesh keep silence and with fear and trembling stand;
Ponder nothing earthly minded, for with blessing in his hand.
Christ our God to earth descendeth, our full homage to demand.”

Homage.
Worship. God in the flesh.
Business as usual is about to be interrupted.

We're not celebrating the holiday season any more.
We're celebrating Christmas.

JOY IN THE DARKNESS

And tonight we celebrate Christmas with people that our world has forgotten.

These folks reside in the fields at night.
They work hard, but no one is around to notice.

Maybe you know someone like this.
Maybe you are one of those people.

Maybe your world is dark.
Maybe you have no sense of peace.
Maybe you feel abandoned and alone.

Tonight we have good news.
Tonight we have gospel.

The yoke of the world is going to be replaced by the peace of God.
The hatred of the world is going to be crowded out by God's good will.

This is Christmas.

The dark world is about to get a lot brighter.
The glory of the Lord is going to shine all around us.

The din of the world is about to be replaced by the sweet sound of trumpets
and choirs of angels.

Our careless lifestyle is about to be replaced by holy fear and trembling.
Our despair is about to be replaced by unexpected joy.

This is not the holiday season.
This is Christmas.

Tonight we celebrate the birth of the Messiah, the King of kings, the Lord of
lords, the Son of God.

This message brings hope and joy for more than just a season.
This message brings hope and joy for eternity.

GOD HAS ROOM

The world still does not have room for Jesus.

The world still puts out the “no vacancy” sign when it comes to Jesus and
those that he loves.

The world still don't understand him or the ones that seek to serve him.

But, God has a surprise for the world.

Despite doing their worst.
Jesus still does God's best.

The world might not have room.
But, God has room for the world.

The Bible tells us that Jesus comes into the world not to condemn the
world, but that the world through him might be saved.

Let's make it personal.
God in Christ comes not to condemn you.
God in Christ comes that you might be saved.

This is Christmas.
There's always room for one more in God's Kingdom.

THE POWER OF CAROLS

Jim Wallis tells of a time when he left the church.

Like many college students he felt like the church was saying one thing but doing another.

They really weren't promoting the peace and justice that were such a part of the biblical message.

But, one thing kept drawing him back ... Christmas carols.

He said that as he made his way home from Michigan State for Christmas, he would listen to Christmas carols on the radio.

He would listen with tears in his eyes.

He knew that he would hear those same carols at the services in his home church.

He would hide his tears from his parents because the rebellious streak in him didn't want them to know what he was feeling.

But, when he was away from the church the carols kept drawing him back. The carols suggested that there was hope for a new and better world.

(He eventually did come back home.

Today he leads a Christian community that is devoted to peace and justice.)

Tonight I know that some of you might feel like Jim felt ... far from the people of God.

And part of the problem may be us.

Maybe you think that we Christians talk too much about peace and justice and do too little to make it a reality. You would be right.

Like the religious leaders of Jesus' day, we sometimes have a hard time making room for Jesus ... the real Jesus ... the Jesus we find in the Bible.

Maybe your heart is filled with fear or anguish over some loss. And this keeps you from connecting with Jesus ... or anybody else this year.

I understand.

There are more of us here tonight than you might think. Not all of our smiles are heartfelt.

(By the way, we're thinking about having a special service next year just for people who struggle during the holidays. You can't make room for Jesus when your heart is filled with grief. I think God's people are called to minister to that need.)

But, I think Jim Wallis was on to something when he talked about the power of the Christmas carols. Sometimes the carols have the ability to do what nothing else can do ... open up a place in our heart for the coming of the Messiah.

All of us have ... at least to a certain extent ... a no vacancy sign when it comes to Jesus.

Maybe we're disappointed in the hypocrisy or callousness of church leaders.

Maybe we're discouraged with politicians who seem to be interested only in themselves and the threat to peace that their attitude spawns.

Maybe we're just sick and tired of being sick and tired.

Maybe we are filled with grief.

Maybe all of the above!

We find ourselves in darkness ... far from the light of hope. We have no room for Jesus.

LISTENING WITH TEARS

But, we need to remember that hope does not come from who we are and what we can do.

Hope comes from who God is and what God has done.

God can make a way when there seems to be no way.
And one way to remember that is to listen to the Christmas carols ... listen with tears in our eyes.

In a world filled with violence the carols envision a time when peace and mercy triumph ... "Silent night, holy night ... all is calm, all is bright ..."

In a world filled with darkness, the carols envision a time when light will overcome the darkness,

"O holy night, the stars are brightly shining.
It is the night of the dear Savior's birth.

Long lay the world in sin and error pining ... till he appeared and the soul felt its worth.
A thrill of hope the weary world rejoices ... For yonder breaks a new and glorious morn."

And many Christmas programs end with the "Hallelujah Chorus" from Handel's Messiah.
The great reversal is anticipated.

"The Kingdom of this world is become the Kingdom of our Lord and of His Christ;
and He shall reign forever and ever ... King of kings and Lord of lords ...
and He shall reign forever and ever. Hallelujah."

Musicians have often noticed that amateur singers tend to get a bit out of control they sing this piece. They even refer to it as the "Yell a Lu ya chorus".
It's true.

But, there's a reason for that.
The music helps us get just a little glimpse into the Kingdom that comes.
The music creates a space in our heart for the Messiah.

And in our emotion we sometimes forget about intonation.

I think the Lord will forgive us.
He knows that the song is making room in our heart for the Savior.

What about you?

Do you have room in your heart for the Savior who comes?

Now is the season to sing.

It's okay to sing with tears in your eyes.

It's okay to sing with tears of sadness.

It's okay sing with tears of fear.

... because when you sing the songs of the Savior, you'll find that joy and hope get mixed in with that fear and sadness.

We will find light in our darkness.

Let's sing together.

"Joy to the world.

The Lord has come."

Amen.