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“No Room in the Inn”

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Luke tells us that they “laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”

For 3000 years the Middle East has been the cross roads of humanity; Babylonians, Sumarians, Egyptians, Romans; and in modernity; the Ottomans, the French, and British, and the Germans and now Palestinians, Jordanians, and the Diaspora Jews. For 3000 years these peoples have practiced hospitality to strangers and refugees. Currently Israel operates medical facilities at its borders for all those in need, Jordan has hospitality for over 1.2 million people, and Lebanon 1.5 million, Iraqi Kurdistan 1.1 million and 1.0 million in the rest of Iraqi , and Turkey 2.7 million. So having no place for them in the inn was probably the norm.

A few years ago I went to see Langston Hughes “Black Nativity.” It is set in a city, presumably New York City, and shows a black couple wandering the street looking for a place to stay. They are turned away at a hotel, leaving the impression it is because they are poor and different. The audience is left with the feeling that the Hotel manager is denying hospitality to the future Messiah.

Luke leaves us with this feeling from his text. Certainly having listened to the commentaries of Luke, the character of the Inn Keeper is not one we might want to emulate. Yet the baby was “laid in a manger,” which I presume was a part of the Inn, so the Inn Keeper had extended the couple hospitality. This couple from Nazareth in the south kingdom, like our black couple in the Hughes play, was different from the locals.

Judea in the first century was divided by Sumaria, and the Jews living in the south would have had an accent that was different from that spoken in Bethlehem and Jerusalem. But the Inn Keeper offered the best hospitality he had available. “Because there was no place for them in the inn is not unexpected, after all it was Christmas and the stable’s straw was probably more sanitary than any facility in the Inn.

The manger when we look at through 21st century eyes was probably a more hygienic place with clean hay, than was a room in an Inn or some Air B&B's.

So Luke's story differed on analysis from that of Langston Hughes in that the strangers were offered the best hospitality available two millennia ago.

This analogy may well be a theme for our world that is affected by the popularist fear both in Europe and our continent. Certainly in the Arab town of Bethlehem today, there is no hospitality for any Jewish strangers. Certainly there is no room in any Armenian Inns for any Serbian travelers. As the hands of welcome would be denied an Indian Hindu in an Islamic city of Karachi. Certainly Syrians would find little available mangers in the formerly hospitable Germany. And I suspect our welcoming bronze lady in New York Harbor will not be offering much to huddled masses yearning to be free these next few years.

But our Inn Keeper two thousand years ago did not see the stranger in Mary and Joseph but saw beyond their difference or saw through all differentness and welcomed the humanness of their need into his home and opened his heart with what hospitality he could accommodate. In a world where tribalism is often made a virtue, in a world where the word "alien" makes us strangers who must be separated from each other, let us look to the Inn Keeper.

After an election period that has accented our differences and downplayed our similarities, let us reflect on those qualities on which we can agree. In an electronic modernity where alienations are becoming more prevalent as we only communicate on cell phones and computers, let us look for real human contact. In a commercial modernity where we can purchase anything and everything we need without leaving our home fortresses, let us go out into the world. In a season of watching sporting events from the comfort of your reclining chair and not hearing a single live human comment, let us seek community. In an intellectual environment where our sources of national and world awareness have become more polarized, let us look to all sides with open hearts.

We remember the words of Luke that there was no room in the Inn and let us open the Inns in our hearts because all children need the love shown to the Christ child. All children need the safety and security that the manger offered and everyone requires affirmation and companionship like that offered in Bethlehem. As children of the world let us look to ourselves and try to open the Inns of our hearts and souls for every stranger who crosses our path, remembering that a manger scene without Jews, Arabs or Africans would consist only of cattle and camels. This is the message of Luke's Inn Keeper and the secret to preserving the spirit of Christmas throughout the year.

In an ever-evolving and never-ending world. Amen