

The Inn: Housing the Holy
Jeremiah 33:14-16, Psalm 25:4-5

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A few weeks ago, I shared with you how much I loved to sing in the church children's choir when I was growing up. Well, that continued into my youth with the highpoint being when, in early high school, I starred in our annual Christmas musical. That year, the musical was entitled, "No Vacancy". It was the story of Jesus's birth from the point of view of the innkeeper who offered his stable to Mary and Joseph on the night Jesus was born. Now, if you haven't figured it out yet, that meant I was asked to play the innkeeper, and I was 14-years-old and at the height of my adolescent angst about gender and sexuality, popularity and appearance. The role meant I would have to dress up as a man, complete with a beard, and that was totally embarrassing! On the other hand, it was the lead role! One kind of vanity won out over the other, and I took the part.

I still remember the theme song. "No vacancy, no vacancy. At the Bethlehem Inn there's no vacancy. No room for you, no room for me. At the Bethlehem Inn there's no vacancy. There's truly no room at the inn tonight. No room at all!"

So, you can see where I have a certain affinity for our Advent sermon series theme this year, The Inn: Housing the Holy. I want to thank the worship team for the wonderful setting - especially Dave Moore for building the barn door. And, of course, Peter Logan, for carrying on the role of the innkeeper!

Advent, the four weeks leading up to Christmas, has always been a season of waiting and preparation for the birth of Jesus. In the early church, it was the time in which new converts learned about Jesus and prepared to be baptized on Epiphany. In the Eastern orthodox churches, Advent is also the time of the Nativity Fast - a spiritual practice that invites us to consider how we make room in our hearts for God to arrive among us in the form of a little baby born in Bethlehem.

Unfortunately, as Christmas has become more and more commercialized and secular, we've lost much of the meaning of Advent as a time of spiritual preparation. So, this year, I hope we can reclaim that as we explore how to make our hearts and our church a house for the holy.

One of the great United Methodist preachers in the U.S. today is the Rev. Grace Imathiu, daughter of Bishop Lawi Imathiu of the Kenyan Methodist Church. Bishop Imathiu is the person for whom the secondary school our church built in Meru, Kenya is named. Anyway, Grace Imathiu has become well known for her willingness to dig deep into scripture and struggle with how it applies to our lives today. In discussing humanity's challenges to live in peace and right relationship with God, she speaks of three stories - "the old story", "God's story" - told through the covenant God made with us, and the "new story". The old story is the story humans have told each other for thousands of years - the story that teaches us some people have more value than others, some people deserve more than others, poor people are lazy, black men are violent, homosexuality is sinful, and immigrants are here to steal our jobs. The old story is built on the

presumption that we somehow can earn God's love and God's grace or that some of us are more entitled to it than others.

God's story is, and always has been, a story of hope and community. God seeks to be in relationship with us and so made a covenant with Abraham to be our God and we would be God's people. The Jewish law, starting with the ten commandments, is like God's instruction book for how to be in relationship with God and how to live with each other. Living in community brings many blessings, but it's also filled with potential for stepping on toes, offending each other, and getting in each other's way. So, God gave the law to teach us how to live in community together.

Yet, the people of Israel and Judah were, like us, human and prone to sinfulness. The old story was so deeply embedded in them, and they were perpetually breaking the law. That presented in ways you might expect - worshipping other gods, stealing, debauchery, and so on - but it also included things like hoarding resources, excluding others, and not caring for those most in need of care.

So, God began to call prophets to speak for God and remind the people of God's story. Sometimes, that took some powerful and condemning words as humans are not quick to acknowledge when they're messing up. But, the prophet had another role, too, and that was to speak God's words of hope, to share God's promise of a new story. God would do something new, send a savior, offer the people a new covenant and the chance to try again.

That is what Jeremiah is speaking of in our scripture passage for today. Jeremiah was God's prophet at the time that Jerusalem was utterly destroyed by the Babylonians in 587 BC. The people of Judah were scattered and held in exile all across the Babylonian Empire. Their lives were in chaos. They had lost everything that held them together as God's people. It is into that reality that Jeremiah, himself held in a Babylonian prison, speaks these words:

The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill my gracious promise with the people of Israel and Judah. In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is what he will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness.

Jeremiah is prophesying the coming of Christ - a child, a descendant of the great King David, who would come and teach the people how to live in right relationship with God and each other again. He would come and show them by his example how to live by God's values - values of kindness, acceptance, helping those in need, sharing resources so everyone has some instead some having all. Jeremiah comes to them with the promise that, though they are living in exile, someone is coming who will invite them into a new story and guide them to live just and loving and righteous lives.

Of course, we understand what it is like to live through a very challenging time, in circumstances that are uncertain and out of our control. Over the last twenty-one months, we have had our own experiences of exile - whether that is the literal exile of living in quarantine or the emotional and spiritual exile of the heart that continues to plague so many of us - we know the yearning for hope that the Jewish people felt at that time. We, too, need the hope Jeremiah offers.

Yet, to receive the promise of the new story that comes with Jesus' birth, we need to prepare ourselves. We need to make room in our hearts, in our lives, in our church for the coming of the One who will teach us compassion, love, and justice. The Lord of Righteousness. The word "righteous" means acting in accordance with divine or moral law, and what Jesus taught us is that divine law is best summed up as loving God and loving neighbor.

So, what is the work you need to do this Advent to make room in your heart for Jesus? What parts of the old story are cluttering up space in your heart? Have you been told that you are lesser - too dark-skinned, too poor, too young, too fat, too selfish, too gay, too feminine or masculine, too ugly, too dumb - so often that you have come to believe it is true? Or, do you find that despite your best intentions, you still judge others based on their appearance, skin color, age, and so on? Or maybe you find yourself quick to get defensive or angry or critical? Maybe you live with a mindset of scarcity holding onto much more than you need - more possessions, more wealth - rather than sharing so those who have nothing might have something?

These are all remnants of the old story, and we all live with them, many of them so deeply embedded in us that we don't recognize them. Yet, the coming of Jesus is the promise of a new beginning, a new story for each of us and for our world that tells of God's reign where all of us are loved and accepted and loving and accepting and the peace of God binds us to one other.

But first, we have to identify the clutter left in our hearts by the old story. Then, we turn to God to show us God's way. Hear these words again from Psalm 25.

Make your ways known to me, Lord; teach me your paths.

Lead me in your truth—teach it to me— because you are the God who saves me.

I put my hope in you all day long.

Advent is a season in which we open ourselves to God and ask God to guide our way. It's easy to forget, to lose sight of, what it means to live in right relationship with God, but we can use these weeks to rediscover through prayer and worship and conversation how to live in God's kingdom, how to open our hearts widely, and how, through compassion and generosity, to be representatives of Christ in the world.

As this Advent season begins, may you commit to taking time to clear the clutter from your heart and make room for the holy in your life. Because, as much as I enjoyed starring in that musical, I don't want any of us to get to Christmas Eve, hear the story of a young pregnant woman and her husband seeking a place to give birth to God's son, and look in our hearts and find there's no vacancy. Amen.