

NO ROOM?
Christmas Eve 2011 Meditation

I'm sure most of you will agree with me when I say there's not a lot of enthusiasm for sermons on Christmas Eve. And there is certainly less for lengthy ones. So I promise this will be brief. But it will not be typical. I figure you've come this far, there should be something worth hearing, not just platitudes about a cute well-behaved baby – no colic, no thrush, no tears, no tantrums . . . but that isn't life, is it?

Two weeks ago, our choir presented their annual Cantata, a blend of poetry and anthems, artistically intertwined. And one poem stood out to me; it made a point I had never thought about. That is not to say you haven't thought about it, and if you have, please tolerate me for the next 5 minutes. The poem is "Room in the Inn" by Sally Meyer [1997].

*How much different would things have been,
If maybe there had been room at the inn?
No hay, no manger, no beasts, no stall.
Rather, plenty of beds and blankets for all.
Not a proprietor in his right mind
Would allow all those shepherds, the filthiest kind,
To enter the doors of his establishment,
Not even the ones, who by angels were sent!
And the star overhead, no matter the beam,
Through walls made of mud, would not have been seen.
No bleating of lamb, no cooing of bird.
Would songs of the angels have even been heard?
Maybe the kings would have been turned away.
Foreigners weren't welcome in that place or that day.
Don't blame the innkeepers doing their jobs.
How could they know it was the Son of God?
Like the rest of his life, it was part of the plan.
A humble birth, a humble man.
Yes, it happened as it should have been,
No place to stay. No room in the inn.*

First of all, we need to paint the scene a bit more accurately . . . this was no Motel 6, much less a Marriott. This was hardly more than a sometimes bed and breakfast. In those days, in the small hamlets of Bethlehem and Nazareth, there were rarely visitors, and the census must have overwhelmed the tiny, crowded cluster of homes. And as more recent translations have noted, it's more appropriate to say that the guestroom was filled. The living quarters, including the guest room, would have been on the upper level, and the stable would have been below on the ground floor, not in a separate structure as in all our nativity scenes. There was no real estate for that. So it was likely to be somewhat warm, with proximity to everyday sounds and smells and foot traffic. The loyal donkey that carried Mary would be tied up next to whatever animals the owner had . . . a sheep, a goat, maybe a couple of chickens.

But the poet is correct. Had they by some amazing chance found a guestroom where a family was willing for a stranger to give birth, the host would still never have allowed the likes of a shepherd in to visit. Shepherds were the scum of the earth. This is why Jesus is referred to as the Good Shepherd . . . besides Jesus and David, you don't hear of any others referred to in a positive way! They usually watched someone else's sheep, they stayed out in the country without bathing, they might poach other flocks to make up for the sheep they lost due to neglect, and even Miss Manners would have thrown up her hands at their behaviors!

Had Mary and Joseph stayed in a guest room, Luke would have had no visitors to write about. As for Matthew and the magi – who knows? Perhaps they had the power to force themselves in, but it seems their entourage

was rather large and was better suited to gather 'round the 1st floor stable, not needing to crowd everyone in upstairs.

So, yes. In God's plan, the guestroom had to be full. The stable had to be the place.

But I want to bring this forward to today. There's a common phrase out there that I would like you to think about: "Everything happens for a reason." I'd like you to think about it before you say it next time. A minute ago I said, "in God's plan, the guestroom had to be full," and the important phrase is "in God's plan." In scripture we read things such as "And God hardened Pharaoh's heart" . . . it was necessary for God's plan. "And God sent an angel to warn Joseph" . . . it was necessary for God's plan. In my own life and the lives of many of my colleagues and people of faith, doors do seem to open, when it paves the way for something that later appears to be a part of God's plan.

But the average everyday things that assail us, and that we try to make sense of by saying "everything happens for a reason" are not necessarily related to God's plan in any particular way, nor are they by any stretch of the imagination caused by God. God isn't going around doling out flu germs, placing people in the path of speeding cars, creating failures in plane engines. These things happen due to failures of physics, biology, and human error. No, what we find in those circumstances, if we are people of faith, is what Paul says in Romans 8: "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. And as Presbyterians, we proclaim that we are all called. Each one of us is called to some purpose. Those shepherds - they were called. And they have been remembered for thousands of years for faithfully following the angels' invitation. The magi, too, were called, and showed that Jesus came to all people - rich and poor, Jewish and Gentile, weak and strong. Mary was called, and she overturned every stereotype to be the chosen one of God - a young vulnerable powerless unmarried girl, carrying divinity in her belly. And Joseph . . . Joseph who lovingly listened to the angel in his dream and subverted Jewish law to protect her.

God called these people, and they were faithful, and God brought good out of their circumstances. Even in a tiny town where every guestroom was full.