

“The Innkeeper’s Predicament”

Luke 2:1-7

12/24/2025

(Show Manger Slide)

Many of you know me well enough
to know what I’m going to say next...

Has the story we just heard
changed in the last 2,000 years?
(no)

We practically have it memorized, right?

Yet even though this ancient story remains unchanged,
Each year a different theme or character of the story
rises to the top for me.

Some years it’s the angel and the heavenly host
Other years it the smelly shepherds in fields
Or maybe Mary, or Joseph

But one character I’ve never preached about on Christmas Eve
Is the Innkeeper
Until this year

(Show Innkeeper’s Predicament Slide)

This year, as I consider where I find myself
Where many of us find ourselves,
The Innkeeper’s predicament is illustrative

All of know about this famous innkeeper, right?

Just think about how many times this person will be mentioned
Around the world tonight, in so many different languages
And then multiply this number by around 2,000 years

That’s a lot of mentions
This innkeeper should have their own Instagram or Twitter account
(Yeah, I’m old school)

Yeah, we all know about this pivotal person
in the ancient nativity story

Well first, I’m going to talk about what we think we know
Then, I’ll give the actual details

First, what we think we know...
Since 1611, we’ve been retelling this snippet...

(Show Mary and Mangert Slide)

*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.*

– Luke 2:7 (KJV)

And this is the predicament in which the Innkeeper is presented.
(Show Innkeeper’s Predicament Slide)

No vacancies
No room in the inn
All booked up

Yet, there is this young couple,
And the women is just about ready to give birth to a child
What do I do?

So what does the innkeeper do with Mary and Joseph?

If I imagine that I’m the innkeeper,
Well, there’s lots of things over which I have no control

There’s that Emperor in Rome, Caesar Augustus,
And that inconvenient decision to enroll everyone in the Empire
On the tax lists

This means that everyone in the Roman Empire
needed to go to their ancestral cities to check in
Yeah, that wasn’t on anyone’s calendar a couple of months ago

You like paying taxes?
How about, instead of filling in and submitting your 1040,
You had to make a journey of several days
to sign up for the privilege of paying oppressive taxes

Can you imagine how happy everyone was to do this?
Talk about impossible customer service and angry cliental

And on top of that, this head honcho in Rome,
Had no idea how many people had Jesse, King David's father
As part of their family tree
Any idea how big a family tree is
that's been around for 1,000 years?

Oh, did I mention that around the time of Jesus' birth,
Scholars guess the population of Bethlehem was about 300
Mostly shepherds of sheep who were part of Jerusalem Temple's
Sacrificial Lamb industrial complex
All those sheep who were being sacrificed
had to come from somewhere

So it comes as no surprise
that there was not an abundance of rooms or accommodations
for tourists

And, let's just add in for fun, that the innkeeper was tired
From all the work
And dealing with unhappy people
And, for the sake of the Christmas Program, it was late at night

Not my problem
Above my paygrade
What do you expect me to do with limited resources
and lack of room

Yet, there is this young couple,
And the woman is just about ready to give birth to a child
What do we do?

We let our hearts be touched
We truly care for this young couple who find themselves
in unfortunate circumstances beyond their control
We put our thinking caps on and we get creative

Well, there is this place where we put the animals...

Oh, did I mention that the actual details don't support
The familiar story we tell ourselves?

(Show blank Slide)

Were you listening carefully to the scripture reading
Just before we sang "Away in a Manger"?

⁷ *She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly,
and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the
guestroom.*

– Luke 2:7 (CEB)

The *Common English Bible* is a new and more accurate translation
from the original Greek

There was no hotel or inn in the original story.
The Greek word here is *kataluma*

When Jesus was born, if you traveled to another city,
You probably stayed with your relatives
Or someone who you knew

(Show Kataluma drawing)

And houses back then were much more simple than today.
Just a basic room were you cooked and ate and lived,
And another small room were everyone slept

And after a while,
Since you had to make room for those visiting relatives
You'd add on an upper guest room,
Called a *kataluma*

(Show Kataluma circled drawing)

The upper guest room?
Where did Jesus and the disciples eat their last supper?

So you got the rooms you lived in.
And you eventually build on that upper room for guests.

So, where did the animals go?

In a cave – either next to your home,
Or beneath it

(Show Palestinian home slide)

If you would go to Bethlehem this year
And go into the Church of the Nativity in Manger Square

(Show Manger Square slide)

You would down into the basement of the church
Under the Chancel Area

(Show Church of Nativity Chancel slide)

And look into a cave –
hand cut into the limestone thousands of years ago

(Show Church of Nativity Basement Grotto slide)

With a silver star on the floor marking the spot
Where Jesus was born

(Show Church of Nativity Star slide)

Although, for the last several hours,
I'm guessing that it has been crowded down there
Stand Room only, people-pushing-each-other – crowded

(Show blank slide)

Now, let's go back about 2,000 years...

⁶ While they were there, the time came for Mary to have her baby.

Imagine a small house overflowing with all those family members
Who had to show up in Bethlehem for the Roman census

And then Mary, the newest member of the family,
Starts to go into labor

Oh, and according to the Old Testament Law,
When a woman bears a male child
She is considered unclean for seven days
And for 33 days anything she touches will be unclean
And she isn't allowed into the Temple either
There is a bit of blood and bodily fluid during childbirth, right?

So, imagine an overcrowded and overflowing house...

The extended family of relatives might have been relieved
Not to have Mary giving birth in middle of the guestroom
And maybe Mary and Joseph might have even appreciated
The relative privacy that the cave outside provided

*⁷ She gave birth to her firstborn child, a son, wrapped him snugly,
and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the
guestroom.*

Whether it is the story we love to tell,
Or the actual reality of situation which is closer to the truth
One illustrative observation remains...

(Show Innkeeper's Predicament Slide)

Life is, at times, inconvenient – or unfair and unjust
Sometimes governments and leaders do things that seem wrong
There are people in the world who are caught in terrible situations
And are seemingly crushed by the gears of these external forces

And you and I, we have a choice to make.

Do we throw up our hands?

Not my problem

Above my paygrade

What do you expect me to do with limited resources

Or do we do what we can do,

Maybe even get a little creative

To make our little corners of the world a little better

To help those in need of help

When we find ourselves seeing situations that seem so wrong,
It's up to us whether or not to do something about it

The innkeeper – or maybe the host of the family house –
Offered the place where the animals were
to Mary and Joseph

And Mary,
 As she had yet another contraction
 And looked at her surroundings – a cave shared with animals
 So far from **her** family and relatives,
 who were registering with the Romans back up in Galilee
 She was wondering what in the world she was doing in Bethlehem

Can you put yourself in her place?

Yet, Mary didn't know that in a couple hours
 A group of shepherds outside town would get visited by angels
 She had no idea that some astrologists from far away Persia
 Had started a multi-year journey to Palestine
 To give tribute to a new king
 Whose birth was proclaimed in the stars

Mary didn't know all these other things that were happening
 As she was giving birth to her firstborn son in that cave

As we consider what **really** happened when Jesus was born
 And the dark days that enveloped the nation of Jesus' relatives
 Under Roman occupation,
 Let us not forget the most important truth
 of this singular, historic event

God came to us because God loves us
 And though what happened 30 years later, on Easter morning,
 God saved us
 And offers us abundant, eternal life
 Jesus came to an imperfect world,
 A world of trouble and sin
 To show us the way to his Father in heaven
 And to save us

And let's not forget that we are not here
 because a baby was born in Bethlehem
 We are here tonight, and countless people have gathered
 throughout the last couple thousand years

Because, after Jesus died on a cross,
 there was an empty tomb on Easter

(Joys and Concerns / Pastoral Prayer)

