

NO ROOM IN THE INN

Sometimes we like to pretend that we know what nobody knows. To be fair, there are moments in most of our lives when we *do* know what nobody else knows. But most of the time, when nobody knows, we don't know either.

Nobody knows when Jesus was born. In Greek culture, birthdays were important. And if somebody truly important was born, people assumed there would be many signs of the portentous birth – even signs in the heavens. But Jews did not pay attention to birthdays. When was Abraham born? Or Moses or David or Jeremiah? What mattered in Jewish culture was your line of descent – your genealogy. Who was your father? So *that* we do know. Abraham's father was Terah; Moses' father was Amram; David's father was Jesse; Jeremiah's father was Hilkiah. Despite all the mayhem and tragedy around Moses's birth, for instance, we still know that his father's name was Amram.

Both Matthew and Luke take pains to give us the genealogy of Jesus. He was the son of Joseph, son of Heli (or Jacob). And according to Matthew, Joseph was the husband of Mary, who gave birth to Jesus.

When the story of Jesus was carried into Greek towns and unto Hellenistic places and people, naturally everyone wanted to know about the birth. What marvelous signs had accompanied this incredibly important birth? Only, nobody knew. It was important that Jesus was born, but nobody knew anything about His birthday. So as it turns out, we have the birth of Jesus pinpointed to somewhere within fourteen years: somewhere between 7 B.C. and 7 A.D.

No scholar I have ever read or heard about thinks that December 25th has anything to do with the actual birth of Jesus. It's the winter solstice; the days will begin to get longer. Every ancient culture celebrated the return of the sun, and it seemed like a good idea to have a Christian celebration to compete with the wild pagan celebrations and orgies going on. So far we seem to have lost this contest. But it's all part of God's plan to bolster the economy, so that part at least is a blessing. So Merry Christmas.

Since everybody else is making things up about a birthday we know nothing about, I might as well get in on the fun. Jesus was born sometime just prior to Passover season. Tradition says that was

the time of year when Moses was born, so isn't it a good time for the New Moses to be born? Even though it does not match the story we have about the star that led the magi to Jesus, many modern people associate the special star with the only heavenly event of the time that might be considered a *portent* of the great event: A conjunction of Jupiter and Saturn in the sign of Pisces did occur in 7 B.C. And back in that time, people were still calling planets "stars." Of course, a conjunction of planets in the sign of Pisces is not going to *lead* anybody to Bethlehem, or to any other town or city on earth. They thought the Star of Bethlehem was *moving across the sky* in a personal and specific way at God's command. That's probably not your understanding of how stars behave, but if we want to understand an ancient story, we have to switch to what *they* thought – not insist on what we think.

Anyway, in Luke we are told about a census that makes no sense. Luke says that Quirinius was governor of Syria when Augustus Caesar issued a decree that a census should be taken throughout the Roman world. Everyone had to return to the town of their birth to be registered. Whatever we might say about government bureaucracy, nobody (least of all the brilliant Augustus) would be stupid enough to cause the kind of confusion and mayhem that would result from everybody in the Empire having to return to the town where they were born just to count noses.

But never mind the census; Passover, the greatest of all Jewish celebrations, would swell the population of Jerusalem to two or three times its normal number. Accommodations were always a problem around Passover time. The best solution, if you were a pilgrim coming to Jerusalem, was to have relatives in the area who would put you up. Short of that, you had to find an Inn or hotel somewhere in or around Jerusalem.

Roughly five miles south of Jerusalem was a little village called "House of Bread." The valley between this village and Jerusalem was normally filled with sheep. It was the holding area for sheep that would be sacrificed on the altar at the great temple in Jerusalem. In this little village called "House of Bread" – in Hebrew it is pronounced *beth-le-hem* – there was an Innkeeper. He ran a clean, respectable Inn of moderate size. It was always full at festival times, but not so large that the Innkeeper suffered from too high an overhead cost at normal times. He had a lot of repeat customers because he was a conscientious and honest man. The Inn had provided a good living for him and his family for many years.

NO ROOM IN THE INN

As with every normal Inn, there was a barn out back and some pens and garden plots beyond. Everything he could grow or butcher on his own to feed his guests would increase profits. Besides, the nearest grocery store (as we think of them) was many centuries away.

As we all know, one day a man and his wife came to the Innkeeper's door looking for a place to stay. They had no reservations. The man was quite worried because his wife was pregnant and it seemed clear that she would be giving birth at any moment, maybe even that very night. But there were no empty rooms. Moreover, this young couple had little money. Even if they had been wealthy, would this responsible, honest, Jewish Innkeeper have considered turning out customers who had made prior arrangements and who were already comfortably settled in their rooms? Would Mary and Joseph have wanted him to do such a thing?

Even so, they were desperate. Anything would do – any place where they could get under cover for the night. It was unbelievably gracious and generous for this Innkeeper to even consider letting them use the stable. They would be so “in the way” and disrupting all the procedures when it came time to get breakfast for all the guests in the morning. But never mind the confusion and disruption of all the normal routines; they were allowed to use the barn. This was a very generous and kind-hearted Innkeeper. Mary and Joseph were so fortunate to have stopped at his particular Inn. I suspect he was a hero to Mary and Joseph, even though he gets little appreciation from most Christmas stories. Even so, there was “no room in the Inn.” And Mary and Joseph doubtless knew all along that this would be a very real problem. One should never be pregnant at Passover time, and especially not during a senseless census.

But if we stop to ponder, the story jumps to a new dimension for all of us. What if the Innkeeper had known the true identity of this baby? That is what the story wants to ask us. The Innkeeper is not a bad guy. He is, in fact, going way out of his way to do everything reasonable, and even some things fairly unreasonable, to help this young couple. But this is God's Messiah. This is the High Prince of the Entire Universe. We don't know that yet, but *the story* already knows that. And there is no room for Him. He has come to help us all – to save us all – but because of the practical realities of the world we live in, there is no room for Him. There is no way we are going to get comfortable with the dichotomy between our practical realities and His spiritual truth and mission.

NO ROOM IN THE INN

There is no room. There never will be. It is never going to get easy. This mismatch between who He really is and where we really are is never going to go away. There is no room for Him: not in our schedules, not in our worries, not in the time and effort we need to spend to survive here. There is no room for Him in our choices, in our decisions, in the purposes for which we live. There is no room for Him in our attitudes, or in our approaches to our problems or our fears.

We do try to make more room for Him all the time. But it is an issue that never gets resolved in this realm. The stable out back is usually the best we think we can do. And so is His Kingdom – and so is His church. They are rarely near the top of any of our priority lists.

And that's just fine. That makes a lot of sense to us. Unless – or until – we start to recognize who He really is. When that happens, we get a shock – a severe and serious wake-up call. We call it conversion. We call it new birth – only this time, for us it is on the inside. We call it baptism. But no matter what anybody calls it, we have this dilemma for the rest of our lives. His invitation – His coming – and His love for us are always trying to take us into a very different kind of LIFE. And if we go with Him, we do not know what will become of us. What will become of the Inn if we try to do His bidding – follow His guidance? If we start trying to please Him and stop trying to please the world we live in or anybody in it, what will become of us?

Lose our selves for His sake – in order to find our true selves? That's not Merry Christmas. That's stark-raving FEAR. Unless, of course, we know some real reason to truly trust HIM.

So this is never a simple Santa Claus story, with easy answers and obvious solutions. There is no room for this story in our kind of world. Why do you think so many people were so desperate to get Him out of here the first time He came?

It's a quiet day, with wondrous music – much of it pointing to the very things I have been mentioning. So we take time to think and pray together, and wonder about the WONDER of it all. But nothing will really happen for us or to us unless we keep recognizing who He really is. Unless we get utterly and totally serious about making more room for Him. Room we don't think we really have.