

“Let Every Heart Prepare Him Room”– Hebrews 13:1-3; Luke 2:7

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[What follows is the transcript of a sermon. It was originally intended to be heard, not read, so the tone is more conversational than academic. It has only been loosely edited, so forgive any grammatical, syntactical, or spelling errors. If you have questions please contact Southern Oaks Baptist Church through their official website, www.welovethegospel.com]

This morning we will land in the Christmas story as told by Luke, but we are going to get there through the door of Hebrews. So take a Bible, if you will, and meet me in Hebrews 13...

This chapter begins a collection of closing thoughts that the writer of Hebrews lays out for his readers. And he starts with the theme of hospitality. Follow along with me as I read the first three verses. This is God’s Word...

“Let brotherly love continue. ² Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. ³ Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.” (Hebrews 13:1-3)

These instructions are part of what it means to “love our neighbor as ourselves,” which as you know is part of the Great Commandments (one of our 3 GCs). Our mission statement is as follows: “We exist to glorify God through Gospel-transformed lives.” If you ask us how we aim to do this, we would say (I hope), “We do this by actively embracing 3 GCs—Gospel-Centrality, the Great Commission, and the Great Commandments. It is this last one that is being addressed primarily in our text—specifically that second great command to love our neighbor.

So the author says that we are to continue in our expression of brotherly love, which is a call for healthy Christian fellowship. We are a family and our love for one another should express that. The second command calls for the application of that love even to those outside of our community, to strangers. So he moves from brother-love in verse 1 to stranger-love in verse 2. And the third command is to visit those in prison, who are described as part of the same “*body*”, suggesting that these are Christians who have experienced persecution. We are called to care for our brothers and sisters in their affliction for Christ’s sake. Taken together this is a call to be hospitable and compassionate. It’s a call to love our neighbor as ourselves.

For Christians there is nothing really controversial or surprising about any of this...nothing except how the author motivates our hospitality toward strangers at the end of verse 2. He says, “*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*” Technically, the word for “*angels*” simply means “messengers” and can be used of supernatural beings or mere human messengers, but it seems to most that he has the heavenly beings in mind here.

We know from the biblical text that some angelic beings can have the form and appearance of humans and can even be confused as such. This raises the possibility of our own contact with the spiritual world. The truth is, when it comes to strangers, you don’t really know who you are dealing with. That tends to make us cynical and less generous. But verse 2 reminds us that the hospitality we extend may be to His very messengers on mission in the world. You may have done something kind to someone in your past who, you will one day realize, was actually an angel in disguise. That is a remarkable thought, isn’t it? Our author hopes it will create in us a greater sense of hospitality toward strangers. There really is more than meets the eye.

But the point is that you never know who you are really given an opportunity to serve and, in truth, from whom you have withheld service. As I have contemplated the possibilities, my mind has returned again and again to the Christmas story. Because in that story, as you probably remember (and I am about to show you), there were opportunities for people to show Jesus and His family hospitality. But the opportunities were squandered. They

sought help from strangers and those strangers had no idea who they were being invited to entertain. If the thought of entertaining an angel excites you, then how much more should the thought of entertaining the One who is Lord of all the angelic hosts, the Creator of each and all? Well that was who came seeking shelter in His mother's womb in Bethlehem that first Christmas. And I'd like for us to consider how strangers treated Him.

So turn with me to Luke 2... We are going to look at Luke's depiction of the nativity scene. It would probably not be a stretch to say that for many people all they really know of Jesus and Christianity are some of the details of His birth. And, in truth, even that knowledge is probably as much informed by the way their own culture has filled in the gaps between the lines of the text, which explains why Christmas pageants across the world vary so widely.

All Luke gives us of the nativity event is confined to a mere paragraph. Seven verses. That's it. But these verses pack a punch, even if they leave much to be inferred or imagined. His depiction is truly "a little jewel of economic story-telling, each of its many facets beautifully cut and showing brilliant depths."¹ I would have us focus on one of these facets this morning, the very last thought in the paragraph. But to appreciate its beauty, we should see it against the backdrop of its memorable context. So look with me at the beginning of chapter 2 and follow along as I read the story of Jesus' birth...

"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. ² This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³ And all went to be registered, each to his own town. ⁴ And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, ⁵ to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child. ⁶ And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. ⁷ And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." (Luke 2:1-7)

There it is. The nativity scene. There's not much to it, is there? But we are right to make much of it, aren't we? Today, however, it is the last words that grip me, the terse explanation for why the baby was delivered in the least ideal of circumstances—"there was no place for them in the inn."

It baffles the mind, doesn't it? How could there be no room for Jesus. This is the Son of God. The One through whom everything in existence was made. He is the King of kings and the Lord of lords. And this is the welcome He received when He came into the world? Indeed, "it would be hard to imagine a less powerful, less privileged person on the planet at that moment than this infant sleeping in a feeding trough for livestock."² How could this be? The arrival of Immanuel—"God with us"—and He couldn't even get a room with us. He had no room to lay His head (cf. Luke 9:58; Matt. 8:20). There's no glory in this! Just indignity. Just rejection. No vacancies and not one willing to give up their space for the night. Not even for a laboring mother, soon to deliver the Savior of the world.

So what does He get? The scraps. The place where the animals house. And as uncomfortable as that sounds, imagine giving birth there! And your first birth at that! I'm not sure the songs we sing do it justice. Do we really think this was much of a silent night? I think another writer's depiction is closer to reality:

"If we imagine that Jesus was born in a freshly swept, county fair stable, we miss the whole point. It was wretched—scandalous! There was sweat and pain and blood and cries as Mary reached up to the heavens for help. The earth was cold and hard. The smell of birth mixed with the stench of manure and acrid straw made a contemptible bouquet. Trembling carpenter's hands, clumsy with fear, grasped God's Son slippery with blood—the baby's limbs waving helplessly as if falling through space—his face grimacing as he gasped in the cold and his cry pierced the night."³

Try putting that into a Christmas carol!

But these were the circumstances. This is where He will be born. And this in large part because “*there was no place for them in the inn.*”

And this brings us to the “much maligned innkeeper.”⁴ Usually he is presented as a cold and uninviting grouch, who heartlessly turns away a pregnant woman in labor. But that’s not necessarily the case. Indeed, there is not even any mention of an “innkeeper” in the text, let alone what his or her attitude was toward Jesus’ family. But I do think the most natural reading of the text probably implies that Mary and Joseph were turned away by someone with whom they sought refuge. Someone had to inform them that there was no additional space. Clearly no one was willing to give up their space for them. Did no one notice that she was pregnant? Surely this fact was volunteered by the concerned Joseph. Yet it doesn’t seem to matter. There was no room made for them in the inn.

But even here we must pause. What exactly does Luke mean by “*inn*”? Or, to phrase the question more precisely, what does he mean by the Greek term *kataluma*, which is sometimes translated here as “*inn*”? Well, to begin with, you must banish the thought of a Holiday Inn Express or a Motel 6. Whatever this word signifies, it is not that. I don’t want to get too technical here, but this term...

“...derives from a verb that means ‘to unyoke’ or ‘to put down.’ Figuratively, it pictures rest. In fact, the Septuagint (the Greek translation of the Old Testament) frequently uses the term to mean simply ‘resting place.’ Therefore, [the word] generally refers to ‘lodging,’ usually rented or borrowed (cf. 9:12; 22:11; Mark 14:14).”⁵

So in this context, it may have been a place designated for sheltering travelers, serving the purpose of an “inn” (though certainly without any bells and whistles, free shampoos and lotions). It could also be a temporary structure erected to accommodate the influx of people in Bethlehem owing to Caesar’s registration. Or it could be just a more typical “lodging space” that would be more akin to a “guest room.” The translations are all over the map—“inn,” “guestroom,” and “lodging place” being the most frequent. Take the KJV, for example, which is very inconsistent with this word, translating it as “inn” here (2:7), in more general terms of lodging in 9:12, and as the “guestchamber” in 22:11, where the term is used to describe the place where Jesus would share His final Passover meal with His disciples (cf. the Lord’s Supper).

The point is, we really don’t know with precision what kind of shelter in Bethlehem had “*no place for them*” and so it’s hard to say that there was even a literal “innkeeper” in the first place. But there would have been someone (or maybe several someones) who alerted Joseph to the fact that there was no space for them in the place (or places) they sought refuge. And so they turned to a venue typically reserved for the beasts of the field and to a manger, the old English term for a feeding trough, that would have to serve as the baby’s crib.

There is a tradition dating back to at least the writings of Justin Martyr that suggests this animal stall was carved into a cave (as was common in that day and region). We know that Constantine eventually erected a basilica over a cave in Bethlehem, which has since been excavated and now marks the location of the present Church of the Nativity.⁶ Whether that was the actual location, none can truly know because, quite frankly, no one seemed to really notice that day. No one seemed to care. Not even for this young mother who just traversed nearly a hundred miles and was set to deliver a child at any moment. We don’t know what the exchanges would have looked like on that day and what justifications could have been made for sending them away, but the silence and outcome would suggest, at the very least, the absence of sympathy. No one seems to have been feeling the “Christmas cheer” that day. As Daniel Darling imagines,

“Joseph probably wasn’t meditating on the angel’s words of encouragement to him when he first learned his wife was pregnant with the Son of God. And Mary was probably not, in between birth contractions, pondering the words of the innkeeper and treasuring them in her heart... When Joseph and Mary said yes to God’s plan, they likely didn’t think this would mean enduring the grueling journey of the ninety miles

from Nazareth to Bethlehem. And they certainly were not expecting there to be no room to physically give birth to the promised Messiah, the Christ child, the King of the universe. But here they were.”⁷

They had just come face to face with the sobering reality. They were poor, young, unaccomplished, accompanied by scandal, the kind of people we find so easy to overlook and hardly give a second thought to once they depart from our door. They don’t have the kind of clout or leverage to incentivize showing them hospitality. They are at the mercy of others and so on that night there was no mercy to be had. Only rejection.⁸ At least for Him and those entrusted to His care. “All the people the world thought were great had rooms, and the greatest thing the world had ever seen was out in a stable.”⁹ And I’ve sometimes wondered, if there were animals present, if even they would have been disappointed in what they saw in their trough eventually.

In any case, it seems clear, that those who were approached for shelter by Joseph were not thinking of the prophet Micah’s promise—that the ruler of Israel would come up from Bethlehem—when they saw the disheveled and weary couple and heard their request. “The couple who suddenly showed up at [the] door was a disruption, an inconvenience, a problem [they] didn’t plan for.”¹⁰ No one entertained the possibility that they might be entertaining angels that day, still less the Creator of every angel. But is this not how God often enters our lives? He comes when we least expect. Like a thief in the night. And when He catches us off guard, perhaps we too might misdiagnose the significance of the moment, the opportunity, the one standing at our door.

So let’s not be too hard on this “innkeeper” (if there was such a thing) or on the residents of Bethlehem. Maybe we should examine our own hearts this Christmas week and discover that we have more in common with them than we would like to admit. Again, Darling writes,

“We, too, are often disrupted by Jesus. We are religious up until the point it costs us something. We want a Jesus who forms Himself around our priorities and who can be sprinkled on top of our agendas. But Jesus invades our lives and disrupts them. He asks us to leave our nets and follow Him. He asks us to drop our ambitions and join His mission. He asks us to leave behind our idols and worship Him with devotion. While we were yet sinners, while we were apathetic, ignorant, and unfazed, Jesus came for us. This is the Jesus who knocks....Where we least expect Him, He comes most fully.”¹¹

We may not even know that we are entertaining the one greater than the angels, but perhaps we are. We will know one day, when our Lord returns, for He has told us...

“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne... Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.’³⁵ For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me,³⁶ I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.’³⁷ Then the righteous will answer him, saying, ‘Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you drink?³⁸ And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you?³⁹ And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you?’⁴⁰ And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’” (Matthew 25:31, 34-40)

So perhaps the greatest motivation for our kindness, and sympathy, and generosity, and hospitality, is not merely that the person we minister to may be an angel in disguise, but that the person may be the Lord Himself or one the Lord so closely identifies with—His people, the “brothers”—that the gift is received as though it were offered to the Lord Jesus Himself. All the more reason to heed Paul’s counsel to the Colossians,

“Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men,²⁴ knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.” (Colossians 3:23-24)

Do you live with this kind of expectation? Do you consider who you may in fact be serving? Or to whom your service may be counted? Perhaps this night in Bethlehem was meant to remind us that you never know who may be knocking at your door. You never know when God may show up unannounced. And you dare not be unprepared. As Fredrick Buechner has said of this child born in Bethlehem,

“Those who believe in God can never in a way be sure of Him again. Once they have seen Him in a stable, they can never be sure where He will appear or to what lengths He will go or to what ludicrous depths of self-humiliation He will descend in His wild pursuit of man....there is no place or time so lowly and earthbound but that holiness can be present there too.”¹²

May we learn from the city of Bethlehem that day. May we replace our indignation with self-reflection. May we see our own inclinations in them. “When Christ first came among us we pushed him into an outhouse; and we have done our best to keep him there ever since.”¹³ And, perhaps the most remarkable thing is that this is the way that God Himself designed the story to unfold. I really appreciate the reflections of John Piper on this matter:

“Now you would think that if God so rules the world as to use an empire-wide census to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, he surely could have seen to it that a room was available in the inn. Yes, he could have. And Jesus could have been born into a wealthy family. He could have turned stone into bread in the wilderness. He could have called 10,000 angels to his aid in Gethsemane. He could have come down from the cross and saved himself. The question is not what God *could* do, but what he *willed* to do. God’s will was that though Christ was rich, yet for your sake he became poor. The ‘No Vacancy’ signs over all the motels in Bethlehem were *for your sake*. ‘For *your* sake he became poor.’ God rules all things—even motel capacities—for the sake of his children. The Calvary road begins with a ‘No Vacancy’ sign in Bethlehem and ends with the spitting and scoffing and the cross in Jerusalem... Yes, God could have seen to it that Jesus have a room at his birth. But that would have been a detour off the Calvary road.”¹⁴

In other words, He came the way He did because it was the way of Calvary. It was the way of the Cross. It is the way of those whom He calls to pick up His cross and follow Him, which is to say it is the way of every Christ-follower. It is the way of humility. The cruciform way.

“Before there is glory, there must first be humility. That is the way the kingdom of God operates. The first will be last, and the last will be first (Mark 10:31). God opposes the proud but give grace to the humble (Jas 4:6; 1 Pet 5:5). Humble yourself before the Lord, and in due time he will exalt you (Jas 4:10). In the kingdom of God, first comes humility then comes glory. We see this modeled for us right from the Savior’s birth. True greatness is not always visible greatness.”¹⁵

And what a corrective this is to our “glory-craving” hearts that want nothing more than the applause of men and the fame and favor of this world, is it not? Matthew Henry thought so and wrote the following:

“He well knew how unwilling we are to be meanly lodged, clothed, or fed; how we desire to have our children decorated and indulged; how apt the poor are to envy the rich, and how prone the rich are to disdain the poor. But when we by faith view the Son of God being made man and lying in a manger, our vanity, ambition, and envy are checked. We cannot, with this object rightly before us, seek great things for ourselves or our children.”¹⁶

We must seek first His glory. His Kingdom. His righteousness. He alone is worthy, even if His worth still goes unrecognized by most of the world. The nativity is our corrective. It reminds us that the world can get it wrong. Way wrong. The One we see in that feeding trough was (and is) none other than the one true God, come in human flesh and we should bow before Him. As William Billings, the 18th century American poet, captured it in a hymn,

“Seek not in courts or palaces,
Nor royal curtains draw,
But search the stable, see your God
Extended on the straw.”

He entered in the humblest way imaginable so that we might know that He identifies with the humble. And this would be the pattern of His life. As the prophet Isaiah foretold centuries before, “*He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by mankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem*” (Isa. 53:2-3; NIV). From the day of His birth to the day of His death, this would be His story. And it continues to be the sentiments of most in our day.

But things are different for us, His people, aren't they? Because we see now what we would have not seen then, namely, that in the tragic details of this nativity scene we are meant to discern the Gospel in miniature. His rejection here is meant to hint at how He is going to save us. You see, Isaiah didn't *just* speak of the coming rejection of the Messiah, he spoke of that rejection in terms of substitution. This One “*despised and rejected*” and “*held in low esteem*” is the very same of which the prophet writes,

“Surely he took up our pain and bore our suffering, yet we considered him punished by God, stricken by him, and afflicted. ⁵ But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed. ⁶ We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to our own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ⁷ He was oppressed and afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; he was led like a lamb to the slaughter, and as a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth. ⁸ By oppression and judgment he was taken away. Yet who of his generation protested? For he was cut off from the land of the living; for the transgression of my people he was punished. ⁹ He was assigned a grave with the wicked, and with the rich in his death, though he had done no violence, nor was any deceit in his mouth. ¹⁰ Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. ¹¹ After he has suffered, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. ¹² Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” (Isaiah 53:4-12; NIV)

Do you see the irony of it all? The beauty? The Gospel? “Jesus became poor so that his people might become spiritually rich through his poverty and suffering” (see 2 Cor. 8:9).¹⁷ In short, as Tim Keller has put it, “his rejection is our acceptance...God accepts us because he was rejected.” As Simeon will say a bit later in the chapter, Jesus came “*to be a sign that will be spoken against*” (Luke 2:34). And now, because He would be spoken against, we “can be spoken for...Because there's no room for him, you can dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”¹⁸

We would not have prepared him room that day in Bethlehem. But He came that He might prepare a room for us. So with the heavenly host, we must cry out, “Glory to God in the highest!” (Luke 2:14). And all God's people said? Amen!...

Let's pray...

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- ¹ Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke* (BST; Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 43.
- ² Mike McKinley, *Luke 1-12 For You* (The Good Book Company, 2016), 22.
- ³ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth* (PW; Wheaton: Crossway Books, 1998), 83.
- ⁴ Robert H. Stein, *Luke* (NAC; Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1992), 107. For an imaginative, generous, and stirring portrayal of the so-called “Innkeeper,” see the poem by John Piper’s poem, “The Innkeeper,” in *The Collected Works of John Piper* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2017), 11:455-459.
- ⁵ Charles R. Swindoll, *Insights on Luke* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 63-64.
- ⁶ I. Howard Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Exeter: Paternoster Press, 1978), 107.
- ⁷ Daniel Darling, *The Characters of Christmas: The Unlikely People Caught Up in the Story of Jesus* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2019), 83.
- ⁸ For more on the “why” of His rejection, I would recommend “Christmas Message 1995,” by Timothy Keller, where three of the reasons are considered—“He was rejected because of the superficiality of the world, because of the threatening nature of the truth, and because of the substitutionary character of his work.” Timothy J. Keller, “Christmas Message 1995.” *The Timothy Keller Sermon Archive* (New York City: Redeemer Presbyterian Church, 2013).
- ⁹ Ibid.
- ¹⁰ Darling, 87.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 88-89.
- ¹² Frederick Buechner, *The Hungering Dark* (Harper Collins, 1985), 13. Drawn from Darling, 89.
- ¹³ J. R. H. Moorman, *The Path to Glory: Studies in the Gospel according to St. Luke* (SPCK, 1960), 19.
- ¹⁴ John Piper, “A Big God for Little People: Seven Christmas Eve Meditations,” *Sermons from John Piper (1980-1989)* (Minneapolis, MN: Desiring God, 2007).
- ¹⁵ Thabiti Anyabwile, *Exalting Jesus in Luke* (CCE; Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2018), 42.
- ¹⁶ Matthew Henry, *A Commentary upon the Holy Bible*, 6 Vols. (N.p.: Religious Tract Society, 1835), 5:257. Quoted also in Anyabwile, 43.
- ¹⁷ McKinley, 23.
- ¹⁸ Ibid.