

## “May I See the Manager, Please?!”

*Luke 2:1-7*

Life doesn't always seem to go the way you expect it to. I think this is true especially when you are traveling. I can remember a trip I took several years ago to Colorado with my brother. Those of you who know me would not be too surprised to hear that I like to have everything planned out – where we will stay, eat, what we will see and so on. My brother on the other hand thinks that vacations are about getting away from schedules. Go figure! And so he likes to just plan the trip from behind the wheel. It drove me nuts one day when we happened to drive through Aspen no less than three times in three different directions!

Then there was the trip through Tennessee. My wife, Amy, who is also plagued with CPD, “compulsive planning disorder”, and I were coming back from a trip to Missouri and going back to our home in Pennsylvania. We had planned to simply find a budget hotel on the outskirts of Chattanooga, Tennessee on one evening. We stopped at an exit where there were two hotels, one to the north and one to the south of the highway. The first hotel, believe it or not, was booked – except for one “special needs” room. So we drove to the other hotel to find that it, too, was booked. The lady behind the desk told me, “It'll be awfully hard to find a room tonight with the Promise Keepers Convention going on.” Who knew?

We then decided that that “special needs room” didn't seem so bad after all. Problem was our car decided to break down in the second hotel's parking lot. Long story made a little shorter to say we finally got it jump started, had it barely roll into the first hotel's parking lot and enjoyed our extra large room and bathroom that evening.

Life doesn't always work out the way you want it to, of course – especially when you're traveling. This was also the case with Mary & Joseph. Imagine, ladies, being around nine months pregnant and being forced to go on a journey. We would like to think Joseph put Mary on a donkey, a gentle foal. We would hope he would do something like this, but we have no mention of such a detail in Scripture.

So however they got there, problems arose when they hit the city limits. Now Luke makes this sound so poetic: *While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child.*

I don't know about Joseph, but I remember when the time came for my firstborn to come into the world. Amy and I just got back from seeing “Star Wars – Episode One,” and on the way in to our apartment Amy stopped and grabbed hold of my arm and told me, in effect, that *the time had come for her to deliver a child!*

It was panic time, for me at least. For the next few minutes I was running all over our apartment gathering up the already packed suitcases and brand new video camera – the whole works. Meantime, Amy is chatting peacefully on the telephone with her mother.

We don't really know what the feelings were with Joseph and Mary. Were they panicked like me? Were they calm and collected like Amy?

Our picture, of course, is that they rolled into town and pulled up to the Ramada Bethlehem to find a *No Vacancy* sign out front. You watch your standard Christmas pageant and the innkeeper comes out to be the villain. He's busy. He doesn't care who Mary and Joseph are and doesn't seem the compassionate type about near-birth experiences. So he slams the door on their faces, and they are left wandering the streets of Bethlehem looking for shelter.

That's quite a story, of course. It makes for good sermon material, too. Amos Wells wrote a wonderful poem years ago about the Innkeeper. The Landlord is supposedly speaking in A.D. 28, now exasperated that he had turned away that unknown couple.

*But had I seen them, how was I to know? he asks.  
Were inns to welcome stragglers, up and down  
In all our towns from Beersheba to Dan,  
Till He should come? And how were men to know? ...  
Alas, alas! To miss a chance like that!  
This inn that might be chief among them all –  
The birthplace of the Messiah – had I known!*

What poetry I could have read this morning. Or, I could say something like:

*The Innkeeper did not truly behold what guests were before him. He did not have eyes for God. We too, my friends, do not have our eyes for God and do not see God's miracles unfolding before us.*

Good stuff! That would be a great sermon. Problem is: *There is no innkeeper in the Bible story!* In fact, our whole idea of an inn during that time is a little skewed from our own modern perceptions of hotels.

Steven Barabas tells us that the Greek word for *inn* referred in the first century to a private home rather than a public facility. Remember that hospitality was the norm in their culture – and people might have a spare room where travelers would stay over for the night. And this, at least during some periods, was an empty room – no furnishings. Not your average bed & breakfast.

Nor was there really the sense of privacy that we have today. Several families and travelers could have slept in the same space.

If indeed this was such a lodging place for travelers, it bore little resemblance to a modern hotel. It was merely a shelter for humans and animals alike. Indeed, the Greek word used here for inn is derived from the verb meaning “to loosen or unharness.” And so this was a place where one stables animals as well as oneself [See “Inn” in Tenney, Merrill C., Steven Barabas, et al, eds. The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible. Grand Rapids: Zondervan (1975), 468].

All that being said, we don't know of course if Mary and Joseph found the manger themselves or others helped – but the manger, though very humble in surroundings – undoubtedly came as a blessing.

It does not matter in the end whether the innkeeper was friendly or menacing; whether he helped them or shunned them. What matters is that God provided for them. God would not ask Mary and Joseph to do something and then abandon them. God wouldn't burden them with the great responsibility of being the only persons to parent God's Son without also helping and providing.

I don't know what *you* may be burdened with this Christmas. For many people, Christmas is a joyous occasion – a time of great exuberance and cheerfulness. But for others it is far from it. Maybe you are dealing with the burden of a difficult family, and the prospects of gathering with them this year is either unthinkable or at least difficult to manage.

Maybe you are experiencing a great loss this year. The table around which your family would sit at Christmas dinner has at least one more empty seat. And Christmas joy, you think, is something that is in the past and not in the near future.

Maybe Christmas is difficult because you have physical pain – either temporarily or permanently. And happiness is just so fleeting.

If you are dealing with something akin to these examples, you may be thinking that life has dealt you a bad hand. For life doesn't always work out the way we want it to, especially when you are traveling.

I don't know where you are going, but we are all traveling. Traveling somewhere. And you may not see God in all your life sojourning at all. Life lately has been about running errands, getting the Christmas shopping done, mailing off those Christmas cards (especially because you ran out of time last year), going to kid's Christmas pageants at school, church and wherever else. And you can't really see that you are *going* anywhere!

It feels like you're just spinning your wheels: life, bogged down with mundane details. And Christmas has gotten so far away from God for you.

Mary and Joseph were doing the mundane, even the inconvenient errands. What could be more annoying and troublesome than having to take a side-trip during the discomforts of pregnancy up to Bethlehem to fill out government paper work? But never, perhaps, to recognize how God used this mundane moment to fulfill divine promises: Micah foretold it, saying:

*But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little  
Clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel,  
whose origin is from old, from ancient days.*

And God, through the hectic season of Roman census and family reunion works his miraculous will. And Mary wrapped that work in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger.

God provided for those weary travelers. And God provides for all you who are weary travelers, too. No need to complain to management about our bad circumstances – though God still listens to our complaints. But God lovingly responds in accordance to his will – which is always greater than our wants and desires.

May God give us eyes to our hearts that we might see his working and providence in our lives. For life does not always work out the way we plan it; but thanks be to God that it works out the way he ordains it.

And so regardless of your circumstance this Christmas, whether meager or eager, joyous or joyless, know that God is near. And God provides peace for uncomfortable family dynamics, presence for those mourning loss, and comfort for all enduring pain. God's answers are not always immediate and his work is almost always not clear-cut to us. But a lesson of the Nativity is a lesson of God's providence: that God will provide for us.

The story is one of a couple who were going about the business of their own lives, planning a wedding and embarking on a new chapter, but finding God already changing their plans. God chose them because they were righteous and obedient, because they were from the line of David and because they fit into God's timing to interact with humanity in this penultimate way of the Incarnation. Yet, to fulfill prophesy, the child must be born in Bethlehem. To fulfill a sign to the shepherds in verse 12, he would be found wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger.

And as much as we would like to make this story a story about a heartless innkeeper or about great poverty, it most of all is a sign of God's working in the details of life, God's providence in caring for humanity, God's will in bringing about what was prophesied, and God's faithfulness to all generations.

We share in that promise not only of the Christ child in swaddling clothes, but in the promise that God is with us still today:

*Come unto me all you who are weary and heavy-laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light (Matthew 11:28-30).*

My friends, while life doesn't always go the way you expect it to, while you might feel heavy burdened this season, know that nothing is too difficult for God, know that God is with you in your circumstances, and know most of all that God is good. God will take care of you and provide for you with abundant grace and love.

And the angels would sing that night:

*Glory to God in the highest,  
And on earth peace among those whom he favors!*

Thanks be to God for the miracle of the Nativity and the everyday miracle of God's continued promises fulfilled in us.

Amen.

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