

NO ROOM IN THE INN

By William H. Myers*

“And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no space for them in the inn” (Luke 2:7)

As we approach the Yuletide season in which people all over the world get caught up in the holiday that recognizes the birth of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, I find myself drawn once more to this passage.

With merely three words — “she gave birth” — Luke captures in a rather uneventful way the most important birth in the history of the world. Even if some wish to debate whether he was Luke the physician, Paul’s companion, obviously Luke was not a woman. Any woman would tell you that giving birth is far more eventful than Luke’s account allows. Although I hate to admit it, such a narration cuts at the heart of my well-argued thesis elsewhere that Luke was a black Baptist preacher. Every true-born black Baptist preacher that I know would give this scene all the color he could muster, and he would milk it for every amen available.

However, our knowledge of Luke as a crafty theological historian leads us to believe that something is up. He is no mere compiler of data; no mere chronicler of events no mere historian enamored with history for historicity sake. He is no mere preacher that just has to say something, he is a preacher that has something to say. He is a theologian with his own inimitable style, quite different than the other Synoptics. Therefore, we are left with the impression that Luke doesn’t merely want to merely narrate the historicity of Jesus’ birth.

One quickly observes that this apparently dry chronicle is surrounded by passages that have angels flying around everywhere. Luke loves angels you know; he has more angels flapping their wings as they speed through the air faster than a bullet, than any other gospel account. Furthermore, these angels always seem to be carrying messages to someone. Now one would think that an angel is far more important, far more capable than merely delivering the mail. You know, they could pass time with important and exciting things; like throwing devils out of heaven and chaining them down, something really heavy-duty.

Before our passage we notice Gabriel telling Mary that she will bear Jesus who shall save generations of people. Also he tells Zechariah that Elizabeth, his wife, would bear John, and he would prepare the people for Jesus’ coming.

Following our passage, another angel appears to shepherds in the field at night proclaiming that the story is on, the Saviour is born. Suddenly there appears a

*This is a chapel address delivered by Dr. Myers, Associate Professor of Biblical Studies/New Testament at ATS.

whole gang of angels celebrating this joyous occasion. Now that's impressive. An entire Philharmonic orchestra suspended in mid-air wings "flapping" while singing and making music in the pitch of heaven.

Squeezed in between all of this excitement, these mysterious, miraculous occurrences is my text, put forth in what at first glance appears to be a rather innocuously drab chronicle; something about a man and his wife-to-be, who is pregnant outside of wedlock and on the brink of delivery, responding to the census takers, finding themselves in a city with nowhere to stay. Now, on the surface such an account appears to be nothing more than a straightforward historical account of what Luke believed to have been the case. Yet, on the basis of what he says in those few verses some have even questioned whether he even got his historical facts straight. That is of little consequence and interest to me. I'm much more intrigued by this bizarre Halloween-type stuff of angels suspended in mid-air singing and talking to people out in a pasture. After all, only the unstable would believe that kind of story.

Perhaps Luke has tipped his hand, however, and one starts to get the impression that lying behind this mere historical chronicle is an even larger theological story, an even more significant Lucan ethic than initially meets the eye.

This thought forces itself upon us as interpreters and resignifiers of the word. As we focus particularly on the last verse of the paragraph (v.7), we observe that the word translated "inn" (*kataluma*) in this passage is not the word Luke uses when he wants to say "inn" — i.e., motel/hotel/inn in our lingo. Luke has a word for "inn" (*pandocheion*) as can be seen at Luke 10:34, the place where the Good Samaritan left the wounded man. Therefore, the interpreter asks, "Why the change Luke?" Is this mere literary variety or should we look for more?

Perhaps we gain clarity on his usage of this different term when we observe how he uses it elsewhere. It refers to an individual's "guest room." That's right a room, one where Jesus and his disciples could eat and dialogue together one last time, usually referred to as the Last Supper (22:11). Even more significant is the meaning of this term in its original cultural context — an "open place under one roof" where individuals shared space with one another for the night. How strange, an open place where individuals occupy wide open space but could make no room for others.

Further significance is derived as we recall a favorite technique of Luke's; contrasts. Here, we observe his contrasting the idea that there was no space in the "inn," yet there was room in the manger (*phame*). This particular newborn baby — surely that is the significance of the symbolism of *sparganon*; "cloth bands," "swaddling cloths," "strips of cloth" — had to fight for room where there was no space. While on the inside preparing to break into history, make history and change history, an unwary world was preparing to deny this infant space among the very people he came to help, yet was willing to offer him room only among the animals. (The manger — *phante* — was a feeding trough for domesticated animals.)

Who is this infant that dares to make room for himself in a place where others control space, and have the power to announce that there is no more space? Who

is this infant that has the audacity to intrude upon the terrain of power jugglers who control space for their own benefit? Who is this infant? While others reject his request for just a small space in a decent place, he willingly accepts a room the size of a feeding trough that he might drop his baggage for the night? Who is he?

Does this not foreshadow what lies ahead for this infant who would dare invade space all charted out and controlled by others by asking for a little room for himself? He was banned to a ministry that tried to find just enough room for his ideology to take root in a place where there is no space. And, he was chained to a ministry that would expend an enormous amount of energy trying to get an inattentive bunch of disciples to make room where there was no space.

Hear him speak. "It's too crowded in the manager you started me in. I've outgrown it. Things have changed for me since you knew me as an infant, as a teenager, as a young adult. My focus has changed — better yet, narrowed — and I need just a little more room to negotiate in. Could you just allow me a little room in your space, especially since there is so much of it. Don't merely relegate me to that room you cut out for me in the stables, that room which is no longer adequate for my present self-understanding of who I am and what my ministry is to be." However, in his lifetime the infant would not experience this goal. Instead of making room for him where there was no space, the world took the little room allowed him in the feeding trough, simply because he asked for a little more space.

Subsequent to the world's elimination of him altogether from their space, even his disciples would argue among themselves about how open the "inn" should be; about how much space was really available; about how much room was to be allowed to those seeking occupancy in this particular inn.

Today, as we stand on the brink of the day in which we celebrate this most auspicious historical event; before our very eyes an unrepentant world sends yet again the very same message to this infant. There is no room in my inn for you. All of my space is occupied, even my feeding trough. I cannot afford to allow you any room. My life is filled with the abundance of things; there is no place for you. My schedule is filled with the affairs of this world; there is no time for you. My mind is filled with self-centered ambitions; there is no space for you. My heart is filled with gaiety and gain, anxiety and pain; I tell you there is no room for you in my inn.

The militarization of our world and the ease in which it engages in warfare where women, children and young men are mutilated and killed often before life barely begins says to the Prince of Peace there is no room in my inn for you.

The starvation observed in Third World countries and in inner-city America contrasted with abundance in Western countries and suburban America, the audacity of the American government to pay farmers not to produce but to store food until it rots or is destroyed, and the attempt by an American President to count ketchup as food in free inner-city lunch programs says to the Bread of Life there is no room in my inn.

The callousness of a nation that pretends to care so much for the unborn that

they have never seen while caring so little for “these little ones of mine” that they see every day and do little to nothing to improve their plight, says to the Giver of Life there is no room in my inn.

The hypocrisy of a nation that can find a solution, summon the iron will and the conviction to invade South America, fill the heavens with their military jets over the Philippines, find the billions to support the fracas in the Middle East, but somehow their conviction is missing, their will turns to clay and their solution is empty when it comes to the plight of the Africans being shot down every day in South Africa, says to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, the Just Judge, there is no room in my inn.

Oh, Micah, how could you speak so directly to our time 2700 years before it occurred? — “the ruler demands gifts, the judge accepts bribes, the powerful dictate what they desire — they all conspire together. The best of them is like a brier, the most upright worse than a thorn hedge” (Micah 7:3b-4).

However, unlike those permanent dwellers who couldn’t find room for this infant in their lives, there arrived on the scene a host of “overnight travelers” who did make room for the infant to drop his baggage in their space. These “overnight travelers” not only made room for the infant but they made room for other “overnight travelers” who sought to pick up the same baggage that the infant had dropped. In so doing, the very make-up of the inn was reconfigured and the dimensions of the inn, so narrow initially, were greatly enlarged.

Yet, wait awhile. I hear ominous echoes shattering the silence in the inn. An argument has arisen among the “overnight travelers,” the infant followers, the room makers, over the type of infant badges all “overnight travelers” should wear as well as the infant slogans the badges should bear. In the otherwise still quiet of the night a sigh becomes a roar; “no room in the inn.” However, this time that roar comes not from the dwellers of the inn, but from the “overnight travelers” that are supposed to be room makers.

What happened to turn room makers into room takers? Perhaps, it began when the infant followers forgot who they were, “overnight travelers,” not permanent dwellers. Even more, when they forgot the one and only law the infant gave; “check your baggage at the door.” Because with all the “overnight travelers” that will ultimately descend upon this inn there is only room for one set of baggage — mine.

Don’t you know that this inn has an inexhaustible amount of space for the “overnight travelers” seeking temporary lodging. It has elasticity the likes of which no “overnight traveler” has ever seen, one that allows it to stretch without breaking. For somehow when people are involved in short-term matters there always seems to be room for just one more; you know, one more on the elevator, in the automobile, at the dinner table, overnight lodging.

However, baggage is an altogether different matter. It has a way of accumulating, feeding on itself, thinking more highly of itself than it ought, taking up more room than is necessary, reducing the seemingly infinite amount of space available for individuals. Somehow people feel it’s necessary to drag all the baggage along that they can carry, thereby narrowing the space that

otherwise would allow room in the inn for other “overnight travelers” passing in the night, heading the same way.

Have you not noticed that most people carry more baggage than is necessary, filled with more contents than they need. Even in an elevator that appears to be completely filled, if you asked for those purses and brief cases — baggage if you will — how much more room would there be? Even if you only took the contents from the baggage that they didn’t need undoubtedly you could still make room for one more.

Like the story of our text, we also encounter this strange phenomenon today in our inn. We operate in a wide open place where individuals occupy space but can make no room. Whereas it is lamentable that we live in a world that makes no space for Jesus, I am even more disturbed by what I observe taking place in the inn of the “overnight travelers” — the church. These travelers who are supposed to be room makers have instead opted to be room takers. There is no room in their space for other “overnight travelers” who perhaps look a little different, talk a little different, walk a little different than they do. They don’t like the baggage of these different travelers, because the contents might be slightly different than their own.

Hereafter, we prepare to celebrate again the meaning of this most significant event in the life of the church. I call upon those of us who are “overnight travelers” to consider whether we are room makers or room takers. I call upon us to ponder again the contents and weight of our baggage and its impact on the configuration of the inn.

For instance, whence cometh this mind-set that makes “inerrancy” the shibboleth of Christianity, thereby leaving no room in the inn for some? Whose baggage is that anyway? Is this not circumcision, dietary laws and special days all over again, whereby only the labels on the badges have changed? Or, how is it that on the one hand we can affirm the sovereignty of God to call whom He wills, and to distribute gifts as he pleases. Yet we make no room in the inn for those who patiently assert and demonstrate that the call to a particular ministry is upon their lives? If we have decided beforehand what room in the inn other “overnight travelers” can occupy, whom God could not call to certain ministries as a result of some supposedly permanent blemish like gender for some, divorce for others and missing limbs for still others, who really is the Sovereign One? Perhaps it is not unfair to ask when we do this whether we are not to some degree laying claim to our own unblemished state and worthiness to be called. Am I arguing that anything and everything goes, for no limits whatsoever. God forbid! Rather, I’m asking, limits according to the contents of whose baggage?

I asked a biblical scholar that I know who had taught Old Testament for 20 years why he had quit teaching in seminary? His response was sobering. “I got tired of teaching people who knew all the answers. Teaching Bible is the only discipline in higher education in which students come knowing all the answers beforehand.” Similarly, I find myself mortified by the observation that so many student’s actions suggest that they come to seminary — not at Ashland of course — not to learn how to become better room makers, rather

they come as "overnight travelers" to exercise their power as room takers. They are much more interested in restricting the size, shape, and diversity of the inn according to their dogmas.

What madness has gripped those of us who are nothing more than "overnight travelers"? What blindness keeps us from seeing that this makes our inn look just like all others, a place where those in power guard the gate and their space with tenacity and can make no room for anyone else different. How much different is it than those "inns" across this nation, whether chiseled in stone, wood or the mind that says "no blacks," "no women," in our inn? Are we who are "overnight travelers," not acting like those who are permanent dwellers?

Some years ago I had a white student of mine, who was the pastor of a church, lament in class that he was certain that if I came to his church I would not be welcomed, because I am black.

Another white student of mine, who was a pastor also called me one day inquiring whether a course I was going to teach in the summer on urban ministry would aid him and his denomination in planting churches in the inner-city. When I asked for what reason he wanted to establish these churches, especially in view of the excessive number there already, he said, "Because, I have always been told and understood that the problem with the black church is that they are lacking leadership." I wanted to ask him, but didn't, from what level of Dante's Hades had he received this information.

Just last year, 1988, the first black commencement speaker to address an Ashland seminary graduating class in its history was verbally attacked by a white "overnight traveler." She did not like how he understood the gospel. At the same time her husband accosted the vice president for letting this black "overnight traveler" in the inn in the first place. His reasoning: "The black church doesn't understand the Bible anyway." Whose inn is this anyway? My prayer to God is that we would be delivered from power moves inside the inn.

But, I prefer an inn that has enough space in it that allows even an untrained Black Baptist preacher in Cleveland to tell a little boy from the hills and molehills of Mississippi that there is room in the inn, room for you just as you are. It matters little that you are in a foreign city, of a race of people in a foreign land, stripped of name, heritage and ethnic identity. The infant child that was told, "there is no room in the inn" has taken over the inn, reconfigured its dimensions and he has found some spare rooms. He says that the inn belongs to his father, not to any "overnight traveler". To those whom room takers are trying to shut out of the inn, he says, "let not your hearts be troubled, believe in God, believe also in me. For in my Father's inn are many rooms."

I prefer an inn in which I can hear uttered in the hallways the stirring depth of the Lutherans' "A Mighty Fortress of God," and where the harmonious reverberations of the Methodists' "Oh For a Thousand Tongues" lifts my spirit. But, I want a room in that inn where I can go to hear my people sing "When I can read my title clear to mansions in the sky, I'll bid farewell to every fear and wipe my weeping eyes. Should earth against my soul engage, And fiery darts be hurled, Then I can smile at Satan's rage, And face a frowning world."

I prefer an inn that rings with the melodious chant of the Presbyterians' Westminster Confession, but just allow me a room where I can hear the broken cadence of the black deacon's prayer — "Father, I want to thank you for waking me up this morning the blood still running warm in my veins, still had the right conception of my mind, the four corners of my room wasn't the four corners of my grave, my bed wasn't my cooling board and my sheets wasn't my winding sheets." Let me hear the heightened pitch of the black preacher's intonation as he wanders through the theology of somehow; "the cattle of a thousand hills are yours, the earth is yours and the fullness thereof, you made a way out of no way and I know our people will make it somehow." I wonder if there is room in this inn for you and me?

Must I be Jew in order to be a Christian? Must I be Methodist in order to be in the inn? Must I wear your badge to rate Christian status? Must I be white and male, old and wise, confirming and conforming in order to find room in the inn? Is there not some exegetical negotiating room in this space known as an inn? Just allow me enough room the size of a feeding trough. I just want enough room to be a Christian in your space.

I want an inn that has grown to the size of a city adorned as a bride prepared to meet her husband coming down out of heaven with entry points from every direction, dwellers from every tribe of every nation, in numbers that no one can number. This is an inn that has an unlimited capacity, rooms innumerable if the inn-dwellers would just be room makers instead of room takers.

Somewhere deep within my innermost being, I do not know where, perhaps it is the inner sanctum of my soul, maybe the inner recesses of my mind, or the deeper caverns of my spirit, where words cease to be effective, cease to have power and only a groan or a sign can be noticed. There, where the Holy Spirit does the translating, translating utterances that are otherwise incoherent, untranslatable, my spirit groans to my soul, "Is there room in the inn?" In the still quiet of that Holy place, my soul ponders the pain of the question itself, the agony of the groan, for what seems to be an eternity; but then an answer breaks the silence. Yes, yes there is room, but only if the "overnight travelers" will check their overnight baggage at the door. If they will merely allow just enough room in their space the size of a feeding trough, this inn will be transformed into a city the likes of which no one has ever seen. Is there room in your inn for me?

