



Christmas at Luke's House

TEXT
Luke 2:1–7

December 16, 2018 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

We have been invited to spend Christmas at Luke's house. Luke's house is not easy to find. The truth is, more than a few folks will drive right by it and have no idea who is inside. Matthew and John, they live more in the center of things, but not Luke. He's off the beaten path, way out on the edge of town. It's a simple place. You may mistake it for a family farm, like the ones that used to dot the American landscape. Hay is baled to feed the animals. There are sheep grazing nearby. There's a real manger out back. It's not nostalgia. It's not a sweet part of the story. The manger makes Luke angry, because it's the only place available for this baby. There is no reason the world should not have made room for this baby. There are too many people for whom the world makes no room.

Once inside the house, there's a tree in the corner decorated with ornaments that are made out of construction paper and glitter. There is an angel on top of the tree. It's not just any angel. It's Gabriel. Names are important to Luke.

And one of the most important names is Mary.

That may be the most surprising thing about Christmas at Luke's house. We have grown so accustomed to the story; we need to remember that it's a bit surprising that Mary tells us this story. Over at Matthew's house, they talk about Joseph, and they are quite proud of his heritage. They trace Joseph's family tree all the way back to Abraham. At Luke's house, they can tell you a good bit about the heritage of Zechariah and Elizabeth, but not a word about Mary. She must have family, but I couldn't tell you the first thing about where she came from, or how she got here, other than the angel Gabriel called her by name. "Mary," he said.

It's no small thing, in this world that all too often makes no room for you, to have the messenger of God call you by name. I think names are important to Luke.

The other thing important to Luke is the baby. When you arrive at Luke's house, you just might get to hold the baby. That would be something, wouldn't it? Something happens to us when we hold a baby. If you haven't done it before, it can be

a little scary: They are so small and soft, and they have that baby smell. And the most surprising thing is that you don't expect just holding a baby to change you, but it happens.

The first church I served was in Charleston, South Carolina. Ella Boyer kept the nursery there, and she had done so for over 50 years. There were members of Session who had had their diapers changed by Ms. Boyer. She was the most loved person at Westminster Church.

One weekday morning, she called my office and said, "Tom, I need you right now." I thought there was some pastoral emergency. Maybe she had a theological quandary. Maybe she wanted to talk about last week's sermon.

I walked down the hall to the nursery and said, "What can I do for you, Ms. Boyer?"

She handed me an infant and said, "Tom, I don't have enough hands in here today. This is Cynthia. For the next hour, she is your baby." Cynthia was less than 3 months old. I had never taken care of a baby before.

I said, "I'm sorry, Ms. Boyer, I don't know what to do."

She said, "Tom, I don't have time for this. The only

thing you need to know is that until her mother comes back, that baby belongs to you."

"She belongs to me?"

"Yes, hold her like she's your own." I sat in a rocker and began talking to her. I think I started out asking her if she was a baseball fan, but by the end of the hour, something happened to me. I had changed, and I just sang, "Sleep my child, let peace surround you, all through the night."

It's a bit like that at Luke's house. The baby is there. And this baby belongs to you. But even more so, because this baby is born of God's power, you can trust that you belong to God. As a child of God, you have a place in this world. You belong.

Have you ever felt like the world didn't make room for you?

It was the fall of 1989. I found myself going to the main library on the campus of Yale University. The library is built like a Gothic cathedral — columns rising up to an arched ceiling. The card catalogue file drawers were lined up like pews in the nave. In one transept, I found the reference room and the other transept newspapers. The chancel was the circulation desk.

I found the call number for the book I wanted, but I couldn't find the stacks. To get to the stacks, you had to walk past the circulation desk to a hidden hallway; it wasn't marked well. I looked everywhere. I couldn't find any books, which I thought was

odd for a library. I went to the circulation desk, and there was the librarian — complete with the hair in a bun and half glasses with the cords attached. I asked, in my best South Carolina accent, "Do y'all have books here?"

She said, "You are not from around here, are you?" The feeling that there is no room for you, well, that's not an uncommon feeling.

At Luke's house, you won't find the folks who are at the center of things. Luke's house is filled with the folks that the world has passed by. At Luke's house, you will find the sick little girl of a centurion. You will find 5,000 hungry people. You will find women, like Mary and Martha and a woman who's been hemorrhaging for a dozen years. There is a prodigal who is struggling to find his way home. There are tax collectors like Levi and Zacchaeus, who are hated everywhere else, but they belong at Luke's house. You will find a paralytic and a man with a withered hand. And of course, at Luke's house there are shepherds. They are so poor, they have no place to lay their heads, but they are learning to sing heavenly songs.

In other words, Luke's house is filled with those for whom the world has made no room. They have all come to Luke's house to hold this baby — because this baby belongs to them and, in inexplicable fashion, assures them that they belong to God. So, as God's children, they belong in God's world.

I'm reminded of my favorite Flannery O'Connor story. It's called *The Displaced Person*.

Ms. McIntyre inherited a run-down farm somewhere in the rural South in some yesterday. She has a few African American workers, which she calls by another designation. The displaced person is Mr. Guizac, a war refugee from Poland.¹ Mr. Guizac knows his way around a farm, can fix anything, grow anything, and he works like a machine. But he doesn't know anything about American racism.

He crosses the line by treating everyone like they belong. Even though Mr. Guizac is the best help she has ever had, Ms. McIntyre determines she must get rid of him. She "has no other choice," she says. She knows he has nowhere else to go, but she says, "I don't find myself responsible for all the extra people in the world."² It's a tragedy, she admits. But what can she do?

Her priest, Father Flynn, pays her a visit and reminds her that Christ calls us to love our neighbor. Maybe that means Guizac. She said, "Father Flynn, as far as I'm concerned, Christ was just another [displaced person.] I'm going to let that man go."³

The way O'Connor writes the story, when she says, "I'm going to let that man go," you can't tell if she means Mr. Guizac or Jesus. But the truth is, it doesn't matter. If she lets either of them go, she lets them both go.

"I'm not responsible for all the extra people in the world," she says.

Ms. McIntyre would have done well to hold this baby. Because the remarkable thing that Luke knows in his marrow is that this baby means there are no extra people in God's world.

The manger is at Luke's house because the world has a practice of making room for the privileged and ignoring the powerless. Just ask the mothers who have no resources to provide Christmas for their children. Just ask the folks on the wrong side of the wall, who are afraid to go back or don't want to go back and who can't come in.

Just ask the folks who are camping in Florida because their town was blown away by storm.

Just ask the prisoners, locked away, many of whom can't remember the last time a family member visited them.

Just ask the millions of children who are starving in Yemen, for there is no room for them in the world.

It makes Luke angry, so he says, "Come on in. You belong here."

A couple years ago, Carol and I went to New York to visit our son. We got tickets to a show called *Come From Away*. It tells a true story.

One September morning, in the isolated island town of Gander, Newfoundland, things started normally — until 38 jumbo jets carrying almost 7,000 people from all over the

world were diverted to Gander when American airspace was closed. It was September 11. In a very real sense, the world descended on this sleepy village. The passengers almost doubled the town's population.

The folks of Gander put out the welcome mat. Everyone in town hit the stores to get diapers and food. The churches opened their sanctuaries to let families sleep in their pews. Musicians gathered to lead sing-a-longs. They opened the bar because folks needed a drink. Seven thousand people tried desperately to find a phone that worked.

In one moment, the mayor of Gander tells a group of people, "We need barbecue grills to cook for all these people."

A black man from America asks him, "Where can we find grills?"

He says, "Just go into people's back yards and take 'em. It will be fine."

"Really?" The black man looked to the audience and said, "I'm going to get shot." It was funny, and it was painful, but he didn't get shot.

For a few days, the town of Gander looked like Luke's house, where everyone belonged. It reminds us that it is actually possible for us to get it right. History has shown that sometimes a crisis makes us be more human. As Mr. Rogers used to teach us, when tragedy comes, look for the helpers.

They say of the people of Gander, they can never get a "knock knock" joke — because if you say to them, "knock

knock," they will always respond, "Come on in, the door's open."

Well, it's not a crisis in the traditional sense, but at Luke's house, you can hold this baby and you won't be the same. For the remarkable thing is that this baby means there are no extra people in God's world. Just hold this baby one time, and you will know it's the truth.

And maybe, sometimes, even without a crisis, we will get it right. We will be the helpers. And when those for whom the world has made no room discover that they belong, then we are at Luke's house. For he will always say, "Come on in, the door is open."

¹For those who choose to read this short story, I would suggest that the actual displaced person is Ms. McIntyre.

²Flannery O'Connor, "The Displaced Person" in *Flannery O'Connor: The Complete Stories*, p. 226

³Ibid., p. 229

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.