



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

This Night Is For You

SCRIPTURE:
Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2022 – Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

A lot has happened since we gathered for candlelight this time last year. COVID lingers. Russia invaded Ukraine. Queen Elizabeth died. High inflation returned. Extreme weather was commonplace. And the Royals failed to make it to the Series. There were good things, too. Things certainly feel more normal this Christmas than they did last Christmas. Some have been able to travel. Some have gotten new jobs or gotten married or gotten degrees or welcomed a child. There has also been grief and loss.

I don't know what will happen in 2023, but I imagine it will be a lot like 2022—a year of beauty and brokenness. And somewhere along the way, it will be helpful to remember that this night is for you. This is the night we remember that the heart of God took on flesh because God could not bear to stay away from you. There is a holy love that calls you by name. I don't know what will happen, but I imagine there will be a time in the coming year when you will be grateful to remember that the truth of this night is for you.

The story in my family is that when my grandfather was born, he slept in an opened drawer in the bureau in their bedroom. He slept there until his father finished building a crib. It took longer than he expected, and when my grandfather arrived, the family wasn't completely ready.

I don't know if a drawer is better than a manger, but I do know this: Luke can't tell this story without the manger. He mentions it three times. "She laid him in a manger." The angels tell the shepherds, "You shall find the babe lying in a manger." And when the shepherds arrive, they find the child "lying in a manger." Three times Luke tells us. It's a detail he doesn't want us to forget.

If I understand the text, Luke keeps repeating this detail because the manger tells us something about Jesus himself. After all, the angels say that the man-

ger is a sign. But a sign of what?

It says he was in the manger because there was no room for him in the inn. It reads like Joseph forgot to make an Airbnb reservation. This is a problem of logistics. But it was more than that. We pretty quickly recognize that no matter what night it is and no matter the city, there's not going to be much room for this child. He's just not going to fit in very easily.

You see, every culture has its order; there are ways we do things. And we assume the way we do things reflects the way things ought to be done.

I did some study at Yale Divinity School. It was an enjoyable experience for Carol and me. Our daughter, Sarah, didn't realize that Carol and I had lived in New Haven until Sarah was in high school. She said, "Dad, you went to Yale? But, Dad, I thought Yale was for smart people?" Oh well. Clearly anyone can get into the Divinity School.

While there, I learned that Connecticut is a long way away from my southern roots and not just geographically. One bitterly cold January afternoon, I was taking a walk around the neighborhood. It was about 4:00, so it was getting dark. I saw a gentleman shoveling snow. I held up my gloved hand and waved. "Good afternoon." He stopped, put the shovel down and said, "What?" I said, "What?" He said, "Do you want something?" "No, I was just saying hello," I said. "Do I know you?" "No, I don't think so." "Look, I'm trying to get some work done here."

I should have said, "Forgive me, I have traveled from a far and distant land called Carolina where it is okay to be friendly to strangers. Actually, in the right situation, we will even wave to cars as they drive by."

We all have our ways. And what Luke knows is that our ways don't always have room for this child. Jesus seldom fits in with our ways. He came as the mind of God. His thoughts on justice and the sacrifice it requires are more demanding than ours. His thoughts

on forgiveness and the offensiveness of the grace it demands, are not like ours. His unfailing practice of seeing that which is good, even in those who hate him. We struggle to find room for such a way of life. He was in a manger, for there was no room for him in the inn. It wouldn't be the last time there was no room for him.

Being born in a manger is not just a location—it's a sign, the angel said. It's a word to us. This manger tells us not simply where Jesus slept, but it tells us something of who he is. Some biblical scholars say the manger signifies more than a lack of room. Some see this as a sign of poverty. No crib for a bed.

It's not hard to get a crib. You can get one for less than \$100 if you shop right. If you want something more special, you can go to buybuybaby.com. There, cribs run more than a grand. There's also spoiledrottentoo.com. They used to sell a perfectly gaudy crib for \$3,000. I checked again this week and for some reason, they no longer sell cribs. I guess three grand is a bit steep even for the spoiled rotten.

My friend Jim was a crib maker. Not professionally. He was a preacher by day, but he tinkered in the woodshop. When his first grandchild was on the way, he made a crib. He made it out of walnut from the old farm place. Then the grandchildren started coming fast. He made a lot of cribs. Not a one will you find on spoiledrottentoo.com. They are too valuable for that. Their making was a labor of love.

Nesting in preparation for a child is part of how we prepare to welcome a new one. But Mary and Joseph could afford no such luxury. Poverty removes you from some of the basic practices of being family. He was born in a manger. No crib for a bed. The truth is we don't really know how poor Mary and Joseph were, but we do know that Jesus would be obsessed with the poor.

In his first sermon, he said he came to proclaim good news to the poor. He taught his followers to treat the least of these like they were Jesus' family. He taught his disciples that one could follow him without a practice of generosity about as easily as one who lives without breathing. He said animals have nests and dens, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head. The plight of the poor never left his mind and heart. I guess when you begin in a manger, it's an experience that sticks with you.

For most of us, tomorrow will be an explosion of boxes and bows and it will be joyful, as it should be. But the one in the manger will be thinking of more than 3 million children in Ukraine, for example, who are displaced or living in apartments that have no heat. I am grateful that we at Village could be part of our denomination's work, as collectively, Presbyterians have sent more than 8 million dollars to provide aid to Ukrainian refugees—mostly women and children fleeing the war.

Jesus never forgot he was born in a manger and had little and neither should we. The angel said the manger was a sign. It was a sign of Jesus' poverty, or at least, a sign of his concern for the poor. Was it a sign of the lack of hospitality the world would extend to him? No doubt about that. Making room for him has never been easy. But the manger is more than this. It's so obvious I almost missed it. You know what a manger is, right? It is a feeding trough. He was laid out there to feed us.

He does that literally at times. He fed 5,000 in the desert. He called Zacchaeus down from the tree and said, "It's time for us to go to lunch." He ate with Levi, the tax collector, while all the respectable people stood stunned outside. He would eat with anyone. He set the table for the poor and the leper and the outcast. He took bread and blessed it and broke it and gave it to anyone who was hungry. He would feed his followers literally, but a literal read of the text is almost always a read that is too small.

Mother Teresa was well known for spending her life among the poor. She often said, "Being unwanted, unloved, uncared for, forgotten by everybody... is a much greater hunger, a much greater poverty than the person who has nothing to eat."

Here's how I understand what God was up to in the life of Jesus Christ. He was not only feeding us, but he was teaching us what we are really hungry for. And more than anything, our hunger is for love. It is knowing that we are loved that helps us make sense of the world and know that we belong.

That's the message of this night: God took on skin because God could not bear to stay away from this world God loves. From you.

My friend, Michael, was pastor of the Brick Presbyterian Church in New York City and he and his family were traveling. He was with his wife Terri and their

three small children, navigating the crushing crowd of Grand Central Station. Keeping up with luggage, they headed toward the ticket counter. But somehow their son Benjamin ventured in a different direction and got separated from his family. In an instant, he was nowhere to be seen. Security guards were called. “Look for a preschooler with brown hair.” The station was scoured. It was a nightmare. After what seemed an eternity, Michael saw the back of Benjamin’s head. Michael ran to him, calling his name, “Benjamin, Benjamin!” The little boy turned around calmly and

said, “Yes?” Michael said, “We were looking for you and couldn’t find you. We didn’t know where you were. Weren’t you frightened?” Ben said, “No. I knew you’d come.” Benjamin had already learned that love shows up.

I don’t know what this coming year will bring to you and to this world. It’s likely to be a mixture of beauty and brokenness. Joys and sorrows.

But no matter what awaits, we don’t need to fear, for Christ has come... and he has come for you. The love of God calls you by name this night.