

## Sermon      12/24/2019

An elementary teacher and her class were studying Christmas customs from around the world. It was an ideal opportunity, she explains, to share the Christmas story.

She discussed with her class how Mary and Joseph had to go to Bethlehem to enroll for taxes. It was time for their baby to be born and they needed somewhere to spend the night. She told her students that when Mary and Joseph went to the inn, there were no empty rooms. She compared the inn to a modern-day hotel or motel. “Where would you next go if there were no vacancies?” she asked, “What do you suppose they might have had behind the inn?”

One little guy, who had been listening intently, began to wave his hand frantically. “A swimming pool,” he responded. Well, no, there was no swimming pool at that particular inn. But, in back, there might just be a pen for the animals— a shed, perhaps, or even a cave, where cattle and sheep were kept. An unsanitary place at best. Certainly no place for the King of Kings to be born. But there was no room for them in the inn....

Even before he was born, Jesus was rejected by this cruel world. I thought about this because of a story I read recently, a really sad story about Christmas. It’s a true story about a woman named Carolyn Jones. Carolyn was born in rural Georgia in 1946. She was eleven when her mother died, and her father abandoned her. She supported herself by working at local farms, cleaning houses, and babysitting the neighbors’ children. Carolyn recalls one Christmas that forever after shaped her life.

Little Carolyn felt so alone, and she hadn’t eaten a good meal in quite awhile. On Christmas Day, the feeling of loneliness overwhelmed her. Carolyn decided to visit her best friend, whom she simply calls “the preacher’s daughter.” The preacher’s house was warm and dry, in marked contrast to the conditions at Carolyn’s cold, damp cabin. The table was covered in platters of food. For a moment, Carolyn thought she would get to celebrate a real Christmas at her friend’s house. But then the preacher did something that devastated little Carolyn—

He asked her if she would come back some other day, so that the family could spend time together at Christmas. I can understand that Georgia pastor wanting to spend time with his family. But here is

what Carolyn Jones wrote many decades later about that event: “I haven’t been strong enough to find forgiveness . . . for *what* he did.” She goes on to mention others who have sought to hurt her, but, she says, “I don’t hate them the way I hate that preacher, because they never professed to be loving and gentle and kind and then turn around and turn someone away who just wanted something to eat.”

That’s painful. We’ll come back to Carolyn’s story in a bit. It has a happy ending, I’m happy to say. But, for a few minutes, let’s focus on what it means to say that there was no room in the inn.

This is no accidental part of the Christmas story. We live in a world in which many people find no room. We don’t like to think about that on this night when we await dreams of fairies and sugarplums dancing in our children’s heads, but it’s true. There are people all over this world who find no room at the inn—

They’re shut out. Rejected. Maybe some of them are simply from the wrong side of the tracks. The Rev. Andrew Fiddler, an Episcopal priest, tells a true story that sums up what Christmas is all about. It’s about a couple of strangers who appeared at his Christmas Eve service.

They were as huge as football linemen, he says. They both had shaggy dark beards and were wearing identical denim jackets with cut-off sleeves. Their big, hairy arms were covered with tattoos. And there they were kneeling at the altar rail of this sophisticated, Episcopal Church. As he came up to them to serve them the Lord’s Supper, he couldn’t help thinking that these two men resembled grizzly bears, if only grizzly bears smelled of beer and cigarettes. He served them the communion bread; behind him, the chalice bearer served them the wine. However, the two huge men continued kneeling at the rail long after the other communicants had gone back to their pews. The other chalice bearer at the far end of the communion rail, thinking they had been missed, unwittingly served them wine again which they received and drank deeply. They then returned to their pews.

When the service was over, Rev. Fiddler gathered up his wife and her mother who was visiting them from her home in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and they walked to the car. It had started to snow. Fiddler’s wife got in the front seat, and her mother got in the back. And just as they were about to drive away, the two large men reappeared by the car. They had only their sleeveless denim jackets, and their hair and arms were wet with snow. They said that they

were visiting from out of town, that the friend who had driven them to church hadn't returned to pick them up, and they couldn't remember how to get back to his house. Looking at their plight, and feeling an irresistible wave of Christmas spirit, Rev. Fiddler said, "That's right on our way. Just climb in the back."

And so one got in the back seat on one side and the other got in the back seat on the other side, with Fiddler's poor uncomfortable mother-in-law squeezed in-between. He says he thinks his mother-in-law held her breath the entire journey.

When Rev. Fiddler let them out at their friend's house, these two huge men thanked him politely, wished them a Merry Christmas, and stood there for a moment under a street light. Fiddler saw for the first time that on the back of his guests' jackets there was lettering that read, "Hell's Angels-New York."

He says his mother-in-law said nothing during the remaining two-block ride to their house. Probably she was unable to speak. When they got inside she said, "I've never been so terrified in my entire life, so please open that bottle that I brought you. I need a very large drink!"

As I look over this congregation this evening, I don't think I see any members of the Hell's Angels. I would hope, however, that if any of them were to show up, we would welcome them just as we would welcome any other of God's children. There are many people in this world who feel that there is no room for them. Some are from the wrong sides of the tracks. Some live in desperate parts of the world. There are refugees—millions of them! They can relate to the story of that first Christmas—"*She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.*"

It is for such people that that infant was born. I said earlier the fact that there was no room in the inn is no accidental part of the Christmas story. Indeed, it is the heart of the Christmas story. This baby born in a stable because there was no room in the inn identified with the least and lowest on earth even from the moment of its birth. He, too, was left out, rejected. That is how he was born and that is how he died. And those in this world who are also rejected are the very ones he came to seek and to save, whether they be refugee children in Africa, or members of the Hell's Angels, or a poor, hungry eleven-year-old girl in Georgia whose mother had died and whose father abandoned her and whose only wish on Christmas Eve was for

meal with her best friend, the preacher's daughter. To such belongs the Kingdom.

By the way, I'm happy to say that I can give you a report on Carolyn Jones. Today, she's a successful businesswoman who owns and runs a paving company in Atlanta. One consequence of that long-ago rejection is that every year she cooks enough food at Christmastime to feed dozens of people. If anyone were to drop by at Christmas and need a meal, she wants to be ready to welcome them. I wish all shut-out people around the world could have their lives turn out like that. If you and I do our part, maybe some of them will.

No room in the inn! How about you? How about me? Would we have turned them away? We need to make room in our hearts for all those who are troubled this night and lonely and forgotten. For when we make room for them, we make room for Christ. Maybe there is someone here this evening who feels rejected, abandoned, alone. Some people carry around feelings like that all their lives. The Bethlehem babe was born for you, too. Perhaps as we take the bread and the cup this night you will feel the acceptance and love that only the Christ of Christmas can bring.