



Room for Us

*Homily by Lisa Wiens Heinsohn given December 24, 2016
Christmas Eve: Luke 2:1-20*

Recently I read a story about a close group of friends who had gotten together after an absence to reminisce, and catch up. They went to a restaurant and ordered some appetizers and wine and dinner, and the conversation was boisterous and fun and even, sometimes, waded into more serious matters. They had a great time with one another. A few weeks later the group had been emailing each other about a follow up get together, but one person kept not responding to any emails. So finally one of them picked up the phone and called the non-responder, and asked if she was available to get together again and if everything was OK. There was a pause on the phone, and finally she said, “You know, I sat there most of the night with all of you, and I almost never said anything, and no one even noticed. I had been having a hard time with my son, and I could have used some connecting, but I couldn’t keep up with the conversation – and no one realized I wasn’t engaging. It was like I wasn’t even there.” The extroverts, it seemed, had unintentionally taken over the room, and there had been no room for the introverts to have a voice. She had felt hurt, and so she wasn’t sure she was up for a repeat.

Does this sound at all familiar? I could ask you if there was ever a time in which you experienced there being no room for you in a place, but I don’t have to ask you that – I know you have experienced this. We all do our best with one another, but life is messy. Some of you are experiencing a lack of space literally, right now in this actual space in which we are all jammed together and some of you have to sit in the balcony or stand in the narthex or perch precariously on a chair in the aisle. Maybe some of you are only here because your grandmother made you come to Church for Christmas even though you detest a lot about organized religion, and you’re looking around the room thinking, I don’t know if there is a single person here who could understand the world from my perspective. Perhaps some of you have experienced there being no space for you because you are transgender and people seem to fear and deny your reality instead of embracing you as the beloved child of God that you are and were created to be. Perhaps you are older and have increasingly experienced feeling invisible in a room full of people who have forgotten your wisdom and do not seek it out. Perhaps you are angry about unresolved hurt in your life and your anger makes you act out to other people in ways that keep you isolated and in pain. Perhaps you love religion and following the way of Jesus and tradition and look around at a world that increasingly dismisses these things even though there is so much power and value and love within them. Perhaps you are a person of color in a culture that values whiteness and your experience is constantly challenged and denied. Maybe you’re a white person who thinks the Black Lives Matter movement

shouldn't emphasize one race above any other but you're afraid of expressing yourself for fear of being judged by others. Where have you personally experienced a lack of belonging? When have you felt there is no room for who you are, your perspectives or experience?

My point is that there are a million ways to feel as if there is not space for you in this world. Some of you might be wondering what in the world any of this has to do with Christmas. And the answer is that it has precisely everything to do with Christmas.

People have heard the Christmas story so many times that its thunderous counter cultural message gets lost in familiarity. Here's what the story means. God decided to take on human form in order to experience life from the inside of humanity and not from outside us or over us. So God decided to be born in a body, but not to a traditional family. God was born to an unwed mother whose fiancé very nearly divorced her for what looked like infidelity. God was born to a couple with very limited means who were forced to travel on foot in order to register to the Roman Empire in Bethlehem, and I don't think people realize what that meant. The empire Rome forced its occupied people to register in a census so that Rome could tax them. In other words they were being forced to finance their own oppression. And to top it all off, when Mary and Joseph got to Bethlehem, there was no room for them so they had to stay in a stable with the animals and put their newborn baby in a feeding trough because there was no room for who they were in this world. This was God's welcome to this world. And who got the news? Not CNN, but shepherds; the ancient equivalent of people who are ringing Salvation Army bells, or overnight janitors, the ones who had neither skills nor resources nor family connections and so they had to do the only thing that no one else wanted to do, which is to keep the sheep safe, because it's boring monotonous stinky uncomfortable ill paying and sometimes dangerous work. That was who God decided should get the news of God taking human form in a baby – those for whom there was no room and had never been any room in this world. What they were given was a sign – and a sign that meant something to them: the Messiah, the Savior, who was a helpless baby in a feeding trough. A Messiah who was for them because he shared their condition. A Messiah who could provide solidarity, but not just solidarity: one who could heal, and forgive, and liberate anyone and everyone.

Some of us are going to leave here and have family get togethers, and feasts, and gift exchanges. Some of us will not. Regardless, I wish all of you a blessed beautiful time, no matter what you are going to do when you leave here. The good news we are here to remember is that Christmas is not only about gifts, and family, and feasting, or even this beautiful church service, though these things are wonderful. The good news is that you can have the Christmas of your life with or without these things. The Meaning of Christmas is that whoever you are, it is precisely where you do not belong, precisely where there is no space for you, precisely where you have been ignored and judged and abandoned, or where you think you have forfeited your right to belong – God in Christ is there ahead of you, waiting for you with open arms. Amen.