

*“While they were there, the time came for the baby to be born, and she gave birth to her firstborn, a son.”*

*—Luke 2:6-7a NIV*

I have been rereading the chapter in Ken Bailey's book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, on the birth of Jesus. He challenges the images that I grew up about the birth place and the hospitality of the day. He notes that certainly in the culture of the day, hospitality would have been found by he who was “of the line of David” (Luke 2:4b). He looks at the narrative through the eyes of a Middle Eastern hearer/reader and the culture of the area - these challenge my western view. He asks that we examine the story again through the eyes of the culture where story happened. He shares how some words have been translated to fit the Western mindset rather than an Eastern one. I would encourage all of you to read at least that one chapter!

One of the images that I like (my interpretation of what he writes) is that Mary and Joseph were given the very best available hospitality. Most stables would be inside the small two room homes of the day. One room would be where the family would eat and sleep and the other room would be where the animals would be housed for the night. In this room would be a wooden or stone “manger” for hay for the animals. The guest room, if they had one, would probably be on the roof and the text indicates that the “no room” sign was that the guest room was already taken. But, they would do the best they could in providing shelter and warmth for the young soon to be family.

He also notes that Mary would not be alone. The women would clear the men out of the room and a mid-wife would be called. Even in the busy hustle and bustle of the day, no woman would be left alone during this time. They were family (of the lineage of David) and families stay together. Not even a stranger would be left alone to have a child. This is what it means to show hospitality. No one would be turned away - room would be made - even in the stable.

As I thought on this, I thought about how this is the message of God to the world today, no one is turned away. Somehow we make room. We are family and this is what families do, we make room. We somehow find a place and do what we can to help meet the need of the moment. Joseph & Mary were family. We are family.

My grandmother said she never really ever knew how many were going to be at the lunch or dinner table. Her kids (my aunts and uncles) were always bringing home friends, sometimes even strangers. Or, her brothers and sisters may come in from the country (she lived in the town). They did not have telephones to call and announce they were coming. They would be expecting a place to stay and a meal or two, they were family. I never recall her ever turning anyone away or not somehow finding another plate and room at the table. There were so many who called her “ma” that we grandchildren would get confused as to who was and wasn't really an aunt or uncle! But, she would have it no other way - that was the way she was - the door was always open and there was always room for the friend or for the stranger.

Maybe that is the true the message of Christmas, there is always room for more. All are to be welcomed at our table. And yet, we sit and worship in near empty churches and cathedrals and put out signs for who is not welcomed and then wonder why no one comes. Some want to check peoples credentials at the door to make sure they are worthy to enter and be a part of our community. You had better be ready to conform or else. Israel had closed the door - you have to be one of us. Jesus came and opened the door and said “anyone may come”.

There in Bethlehem God came. There in Bethlehem the promise of the ages was fulfilled. There in Bethlehem hospitality was found. There in Bethlehem the story was sung to angels. There in Bethlehem a lesson was taught. There in Bethlehem God came. Room was made, even a simple stable, but room was made for that is who they were. This is who we should be.