

**Isaiah 9:2-7**  
**Luke 2:1-14**

**First Presbyterian Church of Delanco, NJ**  
**Christmas Eve, December 24, 2008**

### Insistent Pounding

This passage of Luke 2:1-14 is beautifully written in Luke's narrative and certainly counts among the more familiar passages in the Bible. Dramatizations of the Christmas story, as well as repeated readings, make it a well-known text. People in North America who know little or nothing about the Christian faith know about Mary and Joseph, the inn, the shepherds, and the angelic chorus.

What seems to pop out at us from the early part of this story is the political context in which the birth of Christ is described. We are told the Emperor Caesar Augustus orders an enrollment, and Quirinius is governor of Syria. The setting of the story cannot be ignored.

As we read in Luke, Quirinius becomes governor of Northeast Judea and the census is ordered. The idea that God's people living in the Holy Land should pay a monetary tribute to this pagan government seems outrageous to many Jews. All this and more sets the story for the birth of Jesus, the One who is the Savior, Christ the Lord, in the context of political struggle, taxation, and the Romans.

As we can see, the backdrop for Christ's birth is the best of ancient governments, which leads to dreams of a peaceful era and wishes of a new and wonderful age. The decades between the time of Jesus' birth and the time of Luke's Gospel, however, expose the failed hopes and dampened desires.

Even though most Jews opposed the Roman census and taxes, Jesus' human parents do not resist the Emperor's decree. One of Luke's later themes is that the Christian faith is not a political movement based on the overthrow of Rome, that the church's talk of the kingdom of God is not a direct threat to Roman political order. Just as the unborn John the Baptist recognizes Jesus' greatness, so the unborn Jesus is obedient to Caesar. Joseph is a descendant of David and returns to Bethlehem, David's town, to register.

Let's pause and take a look at what is happening with an innkeeper in Bethlehem. The innkeeper has probably closed his lodging for the night. With all the travelers going through town because of the census ordered by Caesar Augustus, he has been renting all his rooms every night. You can understand rooms are at a premium when a small place like his, with only a few rooms, is full. There seems to be no reason to stay open. He has no place for even one more person. It has been a long day, and tomorrow will be long as well. He has to keep these few rooms clean, sweeping out old straw and replacing it with fresh straw, preparing dinner at night for some and breakfast in the morning for most. There is little time for anything but working, and, of course, taking care of the several animals in the stable. The innkeeper reminds himself, enough thinking about chores, it is past time to get some sleep.

Most of us have seen many Christmas pageants portraying these events of Jesus' birth, and invariably the innkeeper is shown as someone like a villain, like Snidely Whiplash, or a bad or grumpy person. But let us not be so hard on the innkeeper. He actually represents most of us. He is not a bad person, just a busy person.

We can identify with that. In this season when we celebrate Christ's birth, we get so busy with Christmas cards and presents, with year-end internal revenue matters, with shopping and cooking and entertaining, that there seems to be no room in our lives for the most important guest of all. Like the innkeeper, we are not villains; we are simply preoccupied and harried.

The innkeeper is startled from his sleep by insistent pounding on the door to his home and business. He rolls over and tries to block out the noise. Finally, he realizes this person is not going to give up. Even his neighbors will be awakened. He gets up from his bed and goes to the door. When he opens it, he sees a man in the shadow of his doorway with a donkey just beyond him carrying a woman. The man seems young and looks frightened and nervous. In a hurried way, the words tumble from his mouth. He and his pregnant, betrothed wife are traveling from Nazareth to Bethlehem to register, as are others. As can happen, the time for the baby to be born has come a bit sooner than anticipated; and she is in labor. Does he have a room? The innkeeper listens quietly and explains the house is full of other travelers, and he has no room. The innkeeper understands but is unable to rent them a room. The man hangs his head in disappointment, thanks him, and turns toward his wife who moans softly. They know. They must continue to search.

Have you ever looked for a place to stay in a strange city or town and found only "no vacancy" signs? In *The Preacher's Commentary*, Bruce Larson describes how a few years ago he and his wife went to Atlanta, GA for a conference. The hotel in which they had registered would not take them. They were told repeatedly, "Sorry, we are filled." They were with a friend

who overheard this conversation, and he offered to help. The friend approached the desk clerk, said he was with a certain well-known company, and wanted a room for his friends. Somehow, a room was found. The friend explained, “There is always room if you belong to the right company.” Well, Mary and Joseph do not have the right connections. There is no room. The innkeeper is unaware these are very special people and the most earth –shaking event in history is about to take place on his property. Mary is about to give birth to her son Jesus in the stable of this inn.

As the innkeeper begins to close the door, a thought suddenly occurs to him. He does have the stable, which is relatively clean, as stables go. He changed the straw and mucked it out earlier in the afternoon. He calls to the man and tells him about the stable. He tells Joseph to go around his home to the back to find the stable, explaining they would, at least, be under cover in the stable and would have privacy, except for the animals. There is even a small feeding trough in which they can place the baby. The man’s face lights up. He shakes the innkeeper’s hand and thanks him many times over. He returns to Mary and tells her they have a place to stay after all and leads her and the donkey to the stable. Even the donkey will have food and a place to rest.

Against the horizon of disillusionment, we read of the birth of another ruler, from the lineage of David, whose meager beginnings, on the surface, do not compare with the promise and hope of Caesar Augustus. All the world obeys Caesar, but Jesus’ parents are rejected and relegated to a cattle stall. Yet the birth of Jesus Christ is good news for all people, insuring a new and lasting promise of peace and goodwill.

The setting for Luke's story of Christ's birth clears for us the distinction between false hopes and true ones. Governments which contribute to the well-being of others tend to promise more than they can deliver. Their very positive nature seems attractive and generates impossible expectations. In contrast, Christ is the anchor for reliable hope, for dependable promises, and for anticipations which are more than fulfilled.

Later details of Christian tradition are not included in Luke's story. There is neither an innkeeper, nor a cave, nor is it clear there is an inn. The word for "inn" translated means basically lodging and may be translated as room, guest room, or house, as well as inn. It is interesting, the only other occurrence of this word in the New Testament is for the Upper Room where Christ and His disciples share the Last Supper.

Three points of Luke's theology are clear. One, in the birth story itself, Luke presents the holy family as an engaged couple who are about to become parents. Luke believes Jesus is conceived in a unique manner, but he does not believe this understanding is necessary for faith in Jesus as the Son of God. In a world where there are many such stories, as well as many stories of other divine beings who come directly from the heavenly world to earth, the theologically important affirmation is that Christ is born at all – that Christ shares the vulnerability and weakness of human existence from the beginning. We may be inclined to emphasize the virgin birth as Luke does. Luke affirms the one true God is uniquely encountered in the truly human Jesus of Nazareth. For Luke, the emphasis is on Christ's true humanness and as one who shares our life by being born, growing up, and finally dying, as we do.

The second point is there is “no place” for the newborn Messiah. From the very beginning, Christ is a displaced person for whom the world will not make a place. “No room” is not simply a matter of space – a place would have been found for Caesar or Quirinius – but a matter of the world’s choice. The Jesus born in a stable will find “no vacancy” signs throughout His ministry and will finally be buried in a borrowed tomb.

The third point is Mary and Joseph are a poor couple. The child born in a stable and placed in a manger represents solidarity with the poor people of the earth and is in dramatic contrast to the sleeping room of Caesar.

Both Matthew and Luke describe visitors who come to worship the newborn Messiah. In Luke, though, there is no star; there are no magi; and the announcement from heaven is made to lowly shepherds. The story of the shepherds and angels emphasize God’s affirmation of the poor and despised. In contrast to their positive image in the Old Testament, shepherds in the first century world are regarded as belonging to the lower class, irresponsible thieves who graze their sheep on the land of other people.

The angels bring Good News, the Gospel. The message is for all people, a theme of Luke’s in the story which begins among the lowly of Galilee and Judea but extends to the Samaritans, Romans, and all the nations of the world. The Christ is the One anointed by God as the end-of-the-world prophet, priest, and king, the fulfiller of God’s promises in the Scriptures. The angels then announce the birth of the Baby Jesus as the One who fulfills the dreams and longings of all people, Jews and Gentiles alike, “the hopes and fears of all the years.”

The traditional “peace on earth, good will among men” of the King James Version is more correctly translated “peace on earth among those whom He favors,” as found in the best ancient manuscripts of Luke. This more current reading testifies to Jesus’ birth as the grace or unmerited favor of God instead of a human quality.

We do not hear of the innkeeper again. To our knowledge, he does not go out to the stable to check on them. He simply goes back to bed and to sleep. We do not know if he hears the angels or sees the shepherds. What we do know is, by the grace of God he remembers the stable and opens the door to it for Mary and Joseph to have a place for the birth of their son, our Lord.

This is what God asks of each and all of us. Not that we are never heard from again. On the contrary, God wants to hear from us more and more. In fact, God insists we talk with Him and be open to Him. God encourages us to open our hearts to the Christ child not only on Christmas, but all year long. When our Lord knocks on the doors of our hearts, He knocks insistently. He pounds insistently as Joseph does at the inn. We are to answer His insistent pounding, open the door, and welcome Him inside us. God’s Holy Spirit is always with us, as is Christ. God wants us to open our hearts by acknowledging Christ in our lives, by living godly and holy lives as Christ does, and by not giving into worldly temptations which Paul describes as living according to the flesh.

During this Christmas season and all through the coming years, let us answer Christ's insistent knocking and His call to us with enthusiasm, accept and welcome Him into our hearts and lives, spread the Good News of His birth, and encourage others to come to know Him. Maranatha, Come Lord Jesus! Amen!!!