

“Room Enough for Everyone”
Sermon by Rev. Emily Goldthwaite Fries
First Sunday of Advent
Edina Morningside Community Church; November 29, 2020

Luke 2:1-7

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.

Hello, I’m Emily Goldthwaite Fries, a United Church of Christ minister on staff as an organizer at Beacon Interfaith Housing Collaborative in the Twin Cities. I bring you greetings from our many congregations – like Temple Israel in Uptown, the House of Hope Presbyterian Church in St Paul, St. James AME in South Minneapolis, Northwest Islamic Community Center in Plymouth. All of us working together toward the vision that all people have a home.

People of the Christian faith are turning our thoughts at this time of year toward the story of Jesus’ birth told in chapter 2 of Luke’s gospel, a story that many of us know – or think we know – well. We will read it together today, but first I want to share with you another story that has forever changed how I read Luke.

It was a cold December afternoon almost exactly 8 years ago when my water broke. Just an hour before, I had been to the doctor for my 36-week checkup and Dr. Jennifer had told me to start packing a bag – advice Tim and I took with a grain of salt and more than a little hope that it wasn’t yet time. You see, this baby wasn’t due until after Christmas, and neither I nor my church were prepared for her to arrive in the first days of Advent.

We sprang into action – much as a 9-month pregnant mother can spring into anything – and drove to the hospital an hour away from the small town where we lived. Our doula and midwife coached us through the long labor and handed us our beautiful Noelle just before midnight of the next day. What we weren’t prepared for that night was to discover a serious health problem and see our baby whisked away to the Neonatal ICU, wherever that was. We weren’t prepared for a weeks-long hospital stay or for the beginning of our life as parents to be spent navigating these systems, watching these monitors, and trying to decipher every hint of information our doctor and nurses could offer. It was a time of love and terror, gratitude and confusion, anxiety and exhaustion and in all of it, awe. My instinct kicked in to keep her safe and fed, seeing only this baby and her survival.

In this moment of pure human vulnerability, Tim and I found ourselves held by a support system we never knew was there – or rather we never imagined *we* would need. The Children’s Miracle Network, the Ronald McDonald house, the anonymous volunteers who knit tiny hats, the friends who dropped off hand-me-down clothes. The NICU nurse who decorated our room one morning near Christmas with colorful letters spelling out Noelle. The hospitality we were shown was above and beyond the basics – we received food and shelter and privacy but also honor and comfort. If we had not had all of this support in a crisis? I can’t imagine. I don’t even want to imagine.

Hospitality... honor... comfort – do these words bring you back to the birth story of Jesus? I can’t ask you over zoom right now what you are picturing but I think for many of us it’s the images of the holy family arranged around the new baby in the company of cows and sheep and kings and shepherds in our family’s creche display; the carols, evoking a soothing, nostalgic scene, away in a manger, no crib for a

bed; and the pageants of our childhoods or the Las Posadas tradition of Latin America – the scene we know by heart where a kindly innkeeper says there’s no vacancy at the inn but come around back, here is a safe place to be in your hour of need.

Let’s open our Bibles to Luke 2:6-7 and read it again: “While they were in Bethlehem, the time came for Mary to deliver her child. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room at the inn.” That’s it. Where is the innkeeper? Where are the people who would gather around to help a woman in labor? The only clue of where Mary and Joseph are at all is the manger itself – a feeding trough for animals – where are they?? What do they have to eat? What do they have to keep warm?

My friends, I believe Luke is inviting us to open our eyes and see that nobody – God have mercy – nobody let them in. This is not a story like mine, of being surrounded by extravagant support in a crucial moment. It’s a story perhaps much more like that of our neighbors living in encampments in Minneapolis – searching for a quiet corner out of everyone’s way. In our collective observance of Christmas over hundreds of years, we have elaborated with folklore using our powerful imaginations to create other stories and images around the kernel offered by Luke. We forgot how little he actually tells us and how disturbing this story is. Why did we do that? Was it because we wanted so badly to imagine Jesus receiving the same hospitality, honor and comfort we would want for our own families? Was it because we could not face with honesty what it would have felt like for this family in an emergency when nobody let them in?

Harsh as this might sound, I’m actually not here to ruin your Christmas pageant or debunk all your favorite carols. I am longing so much to get swept away in all of that myself, and I will. And I want to offer to people of the Christian faith another way to enter into this sacred story this Christmas. Could it be, that if our imaginations and our longings are powerful enough to create this whole world of the Nativity we have come to know, we could also imagine it for our own communities? Can we imagine the day when all people have a home?

Mary and Joseph were only temporarily without a place to stay – like my family 8 years ago, they have a home to return to with their baby. But thousands of people in our communities, even in our congregations right now, are on the edge of losing that home. The family who finds hospitality in the education wing of a synagogue at Christmastime when they have already waited months for that housing voucher to come through... The family hanging onto their home for now, but losing sleep every night because each month the rent isn’t paid is a month the debt grows higher... Christmas isn’t really December 25th. Christmas is every night these parents spend worrying about where they will stay when the rent comes due.

We’re not waiting for a mythical innkeeper to open the door. It is up to us – all of us together— to make sure that all families, adults and youth are welcomed inside. And that looks many different ways. It can look like that church, synagogue or mosque setting up rooms for families to stay in their buildings – once the pandemic passes. For now, it might look like supporting the shelter with donations of meals or diapers while families are isolating in hotels. It might look like supporting street outreach organizations in your city working to bring folks in from the cold. It can also look like showing up for action to demand that our elected leaders use our common resources for rental assistance and new, quality apartment homes. It can look like educating ourselves to better understand these housing systems that were designed to build wealth for white people while leaving Native, immigrant, and African American neighbors behind. No matter where your church is, no matter how big or small or what denomination, there is a place for you in this holy work.

Rather than letting the Christmas carols lull us to sleep, I want them to wake us up. I want us to start imagining living into a dream where nobody is left out and turned away. I want to know how hard we’re willing to work to make it come true. When we are organized to serve a vision much bigger than our own,

we aren't alone. Luke's gospel has already shown us, shown this young mother Mary, that "Nothing will be impossible with God." If we can imagine it, we can create the world we want to live in, where everyone gets to come inside. Amen.