

## MAKE WAY...MAKE ROOM!

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Christmas Eve 2016

Every Christmas season, I find the assignment rather daunting. And no, I am not talking about decorating the tree or putting up the lights. I talking about the assignment of determining just what my message will be for Christmas Eve. Over the years, I have lost more than a little sleep over this as I have struggled to discover just the right theme—one that wouldn't be too trite or trivial, but manage to communicate the Christmas message in just the right way. This is, after all, one of the truly significant moments in the life of this or any Church. It is one of those moments that often carries with it the weight of great expectation on the part of many, pastor and people alike.

There is an unspoken understanding among pastors that Christmas Eve is one of those times were worship better not be mediocre. There is too much at stake. And so, for the last 40 years, I have diligently gone through my "pre-game ritual" of mulling over the ideas and possibilities, the readings and stories that will move and inspire and communicate a sense of the holy.

And there have been times in this saga in which the timing was right and the story was fitting...times in which it all seemed to come together and what we tasted was indeed, a sense of the Holy...and it was beautiful.

But, there have been other times, in which that wasn't necessarily the case, times in which my message was flat and Spirit didn't really seem to move in our midst as much as we wished for it and waited for it to do so.

That is, I have discovered, simply the way Christmas often comes to us—as a mystery that is unpredictable and clearly beyond the reach of well-intentioned efforts to plan and manage the experience. Mysteries, by their very nature, tend to resist our attempts to define or refine them. They resist our efforts to manage the plot or improve upon it.

Consider this cartoon...

**The director is saying to the children: "Let's stick the line, "There's no room at the Inn" and leave out, "Have you tried the internet?"**

There are, you see, some challenges that not even the internet can solve...challenges that serve to remind us of a tension that we all feel, in some form or another, when we consider the story of Christmas and the message that it holds for our lives. Is it possible that there are times in which we get so caught up in managing the details of Christmas and reworking the scrip to fit with our expectations that we forget to allow the story to speak for itself? Is it possible that we fail make room for the mystery of a baby that was wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger?

This is, of course, one of the most basic of Christmas Eve themes. As Luke's story would have it, there was no room at the Inn for Mary and Joseph and so they found themselves

welcoming Jesus into the world in the birthing room of a stable. The teaching point, of course, is to emphasize the importance of making room for the baby born in a manger.

At first glance, I am tempted to conclude that this idea is simply too elementary, too trite, too predictable. And yet, I can't help but wonder...I wonder if, in fact, this is not precisely the most appropriate message for us this evening.

After all, who among us this evening can say that we haven't been too stressed in this season? Who among us can say that we haven't felt the struggle and the tension that is so often linked to the plans and arrangements we make? Who among us can say that we have had plenty of time to contemplate the mystery of the incarnation and allow its deeper meaning to penetrate our hearts and minds? If you can say that, I welcome you to come forward and finish my message for me!

We are, after all, busy people who are so often consumed with the details of our agendas and our plans that we may find it very difficult to set all of that aside and actually make room for the meaning of the mystery that this night holds for us.

If you, for some reason, find yourself nodding in agreement, I would offer the invitation, this evening, to simply do that. I invite you, in this moment, to let go anything that might obscure or dilute your ability to be fully present to the mystery of the incarnation...the mystery of the Word that became flesh and lived among us full of grace and truth. Take this time to make room in the Inn of your heart to experience the significance of this Holy Night.

As you are in the process of letting go, allow me to conclude with a story that may assist with the process. It is a story that comes from Doug Ruffle who once served as a missionary pastor of the Peace Community Church in Rosaria, Argentina. This small church had a worship center, converted from one of the houses in the neighborhood that could accommodate approximately 60 people.

It was during Christmas week, that this tiny church secured permission to close off their street in order to present their Christmas pageant to the surrounding neighborhood. They took the chairs from the worship center and placed them in the street, facing the church building.

The youth and children of the church took the various roles depicted in the Christmas story. There were shepherds, the wise men, the inn keeper, and, of course, Mary and Joseph and the baby. A speaker was placed on the roof so that the audience could hear the recorded music and the dialogue of the children. The surrounding neighborhood came out in force for the performance. There Roman Catholics, Protestants and Pentecostals. There were some who had no religious affiliation at all.

As the pageant unfolded, a donkey transported Mary past the front door of the Church—the door that served as the door to the inn.

The role of the inn keeper was played by Facundo, a 12 year old boy who had already grown to six feet tall. Facundo was the church caretaker's son and lived at the rear of the

property. While large for his age, Facundo was gentle of spirit. All of the children loved him.

When Joseph knocked upon the door of the inn, Facundo opened it and stood in the doorway. Seeing Mary sitting on the donkey, his eyes grew wide. When Joseph asked for a room, Facundo was supposed to say, "There is no room at the inn." And later, a second line, "We have a stable you can use."

But, Facundo did not say a thing. He just stared at Mary. It was a bit of an awkward moment and the prompter, from behind the church door, whispered his line. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, he stammered, "There is no room at the inn."

Then, Joseph, following the script, protested, "But we have come from a long journey, and my wife is due to have a baby." Again, Facundo looked at Mary and slowly managed to repeat, "There is no room at the inn."

But then, Joseph protest yet again: "We are so tired; do you know anywhere we can stay?" This was the cue for Facundo's second line—the one where he was to offer the use of the stable. But Facundo stood stock still, saying nothing. The prompter patiently kept repeating his line from behind the door, but to no avail. The audience began to murmur, but Facundo said nothing.

Finally, with the tension building, he blurted out, "**You can have my room!**" and then pointed to the rear of the church property where he lived. There was silence. Joseph said nothing and indeed, did not know what to say in that unscripted moment.

Finally, it was Mary who broke the ice. "Okay," she said, "that really nice of you." She dismounted from the donkey. With Facundo leading the donkey away, Mary and Joseph went through the door of the inn to stay in Facundo's room.

The audience burst into applause. The children took their bows to the delight of all. Unsuspecting Facundo had stolen the show and the hearts of the neighborhood. He had, in his unpretentious way, illustrated what it means to make room for the Christ child.

I trust that on this night, this holy night of mystery and love, you will allow the story of Facundo and the Christmas pageant that went off script to show you the way to love as you make room in your heart.

Amen.