

“Is There Room at the Inn”

Micah 6: 1-8
Human Solution’s client story

Rev. Brian Heron
Eastminster Presbyterian Church
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Last December an article was published in the Portland Tribune about the shortage of beds and affordable housing in Portland due to the effects of this extended recession we have been experiencing. Periodically when one of us arrives at the office in the morning we have a homeless person sleeping under the eaves of our church where they are out of the elements. Many of you may remember that in that snowy winter of 2008 we housed John the Painter for six weeks in one of our Sunday school rooms.

Here we are thinking and praying about whether to support a warming center in our church this winter. Of course, it raises many questions about our building, about its care, and about how this will affect what we do and who we are. But, isn’t it interesting to think about this in the context of Jesus, the first-born of our faith? For if you remember how Jesus’ story got started, it wasn’t too far removed from the circumstances of the people who may soon inhabit our building. Do you remember those first hours and days of Jesus’ life? Luke tells us while Mary and Joseph were traveling it came time for Mary to give birth **“and she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.”** In case you might be tempted to sanitize or glorify the word “manger” remember that a manger is actually a feed trough used by the cattle and sheep.

The story is not all that different than what we hear today. Joseph and Mary were desperately in need of shelter, desperately in need of a place to stay, desperately in need of a comfortable, warm, and protected place to give birth. It was a crisis, at the very least. After knocking at various establishments and being turned away they finally did what many homeless people do. They looked for the driest, safest, and warmest place they could find. They made their beds in the hay of a stable and shared the night with the livestock. And there, one of the most amazing stories of history was born. Jesus, the person we call Lord and Savior, was born on a night when his parents had no place to stay. He was born in a place that was emergency shelter at best.

Is it any wonder that in Matthew 25 where Jesus is sharing the parable of the Great Judgment that the descriptions he uses sound an awful lot like those who are at risk of being homeless? He said, **“For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.”** I wonder, given his inauspicious beginnings if he might have added, *“I was about to be born and you gave my mother a warm, safe place.”*

The Bible is centered around the theme of what it means to be “at home.” From the very first verses about the Garden of Eden, to Abraham looking for a home, to the Israelites searching for the Promised Land, what we would call a “homeland,” and then exiled from their homeland later in the prophetic books, the Bible is about coming home. Micah, especially, is an indictment on the people of Israel for having forgotten that God gave them a home. Micah pleads with the people saying, **“O my people, what have I done to you? In what way have I wearied you?”**

Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage.”

Micah goes on to say (and this is my paraphrase), “And how did you repay God? You set up elaborate, expensive rituals, you decorated your building ornately, and you set up a hefty endowment fund for future expenditures. But, you forgot about the widows and the outcast. You neglected the poor and the disenfranchised. Do you not remember that you were once slaves in Egypt? What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God.”

I am intrigued by the fact that 2000 years ago Mary and Joseph knocked on the doors of roadside motels and asked, “Is there room at the inn?” and were turned away. Every night in this city hundreds of people knock on the doors of friends and relatives, motels and churches and ask, “Is there room at the inn?” The story is almost identical except for one big difference. Mary and Joseph were turned away because there was no room for them at the inn. Now the question is being asked of us, a church with ample space, “Is there room at the inn?”

However we answer their plea, let us remember that this is not about our building. This is about “doing justice, loving kindness and walking humbly with our God.” Remember, we were once slaves in Egypt. We were once homeless too!